

Leaders of the Russian Revolution: Ivar Tennisovich Smilga (1892-1937)

Part two

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As part of the commemoration of the centenary of the 1917 October Revolution, the World Socialist Web Site is publishing a series of profiles of leaders of the Russian Revolution. Due to the bloody and protracted Stalinist and bourgeois reaction against the revolution, these figures remain largely unknown to the international working class. Yet they rank among the most complex and formidable figures of the twentieth century and are an important part of the proud historical heritage of the working class.

The stunning and often tragic vicissitudes of their political and personal lives mirror the complicated development of the Bolshevik Party itself and the rapid succession of revolution, war and reaction in the twentieth century. This series seeks to introduce our readers to the major contributions these figures made to the struggle for socialism and reveal the manner in which their lives intersected with the development of the Russian Revolution.

Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the Russian are by this author.

Starting in 1921, Smilga devoted himself increasingly to economic work, which, once the Civil War had been won, became the central battleground for the fledgling workers' state. Initially, he worked as the vice-chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the National Economy (VDNKh), where he was in charge of fuel supplies, one of the most responsible positions in the Soviet economy at this time. In 1923, he became the vice-chairman of the Gosplan (State Planning Commission) of the USSR.

Immediately after the end of the Civil War, the party became engulfed in a bitter factional struggle. The backwardness of the Russian economy, ravaged by almost 10 years of continuous war, and the continued isolation of the revolution gave rise to an increasingly assertive bureaucracy and strengthened a nationalist and opportunist tendency within the party, against which Lenin had fought so adamantly in 1917.

The bureaucratic tendencies in the USSR were reinforced by the aborted German Revolution in 1923. After a series of strokes, Lenin died in January of 1924. In the fall of that year, Nikolai Bukharin formulated the theory of "socialism in one country," according to which socialism could be built in the isolated workers' state. Hence, political priority would be given by the party leadership to "building socialism at home," while the international extension of the revolution was delegated to a matter of secondary importance.

The slogan of "socialism in one country" directly contradicted the fundamental tenets of socialist internationalism, on the basis of which Lenin and Trotsky had fought for the seizure of power by the working class in 1917. It became the central axis of a program of opportunist adaptation to petty-bourgeois and bourgeois forces both in the USSR and on a world scale, expressing the interests of a bureaucracy that had arisen in the isolated and relatively backward workers' state and was essentially

hostile to social equality and the program of socialism. Joseph Stalin emerged as the chief political agent of this layer.

The Left Opposition, led by Leon Trotsky, was the main political force fighting against this betrayal of the program of October and the political usurpation of power by the bureaucracy. It is not entirely clear when exactly Smilga joined the Left Opposition. He was not one of the signatories to the Declaration of the 46, the founding platform of the Trotskyist Left Opposition from October 1923.

However, Smilga's writings from this period suggest that he must have sympathized with much of the criticism of the Left Opposition on the economic plane. The Trotskyists demanded a greater focus on strengthening industry, and thereby the working class, and opposed the Stalin faction's policy of promoting the middle layers of the peasantry in the countryside. In a pamphlet from 1924 entitled *Industry Under Conditions of the New Economic Policy*, which was based on four lectures he had given in 1923, Smilga relied on the report given by Trotsky at the XIIIth Party Congress on the state of Soviet industry, which raised many of the concerns of the Left Opposition.

In the second half of the 1920s, Smilga's apartment in Moscow became a central meeting place of the Opposition. Isai Abramovich, who was recruited to the Left Opposition in Moscow by the leading Marxist theoretician Ter-Vaganian and mentored by Smilga, later devoted an entire chapter to Smilga in his memoirs. He wrote:

At Smilga's apartment we got to know and often met K. Radek, Kh. Rakovsky and V. Trifonov—they were regular guests. L. D. Trotsky, G. L. Piatakov, E. A. Preobrazhensky, A. K. Voronsky went to Smilga every so often. Zinoviev and Kamenev also came, but very seldom. We also got to know the brothers of Smilga's wife, Nadezhda Vasilievna Poluyan. They were all Old Bolsheviks: Yakov worked in the Tsentsosoiuz, Dmitri was a member of the collegium of the NKPS (People's Commissariat for Transportation), Yan had previously been a secretary of the All-Russian Executive Committee, Nikolai had fought in the Red Army. We usually gathered at Smilga's in the evening. We mainly talked about the most burning political questions—there were more than enough of them during Stalin's rule. ... Ivar Tennisovich was a simple, democratically minded person. He addressed himself to everyone in the same manner, regardless of the position this person occupied. He was an exceptionally interesting interlocutor, he had had a rich, eventful life, and he had something to talk about. [14]

In April 1926, the United Left Opposition was formed when Lev

Kamenev and Grigory Zinoviev, two of the most influential party leaders in Leningrad, joined with the Left Opposition despite continued disagreements with Trotsky, most notably on the question of internationalism and the Chinese Revolution.

The Chinese Revolution in these years occupied a central place in the inner-party struggle, not just within the Bolshevik Party but within the Comintern as a whole. The Trotskyists opposed the subordination of the Chinese Communist Party to the bourgeois Kuomintang party, an alliance that was advocated by the Stalin faction, which argued that the bourgeois stage of the revolution in China had to be fulfilled before the working class could take power and begin to implement socialist policies.

At the same time, social tensions within the Soviet Union were on the rise. While a narrow layer of middle peasants was strengthened by the New Economic Policy, the working class continued to face serious food shortages and an increasingly oppressive regime in the factories. This development, along with renewed hopes for a continuation of the revolution abroad, increased the prestige of the Left Opposition and led to a significant influx of new members. In the Soviet Komsomol, the youth organization of the Communist Party, in numerous scientific and academic institutions as well as in individual Central Committees, most notably the Central Committee of the Communist Party in the Georgian Soviet Republic, the Left Opposition wielded significant influence. In some, it even held a majority.

In these years, Smilga was the director of the Economic Institute in Moscow, named after Georgi Plekhanov. Here, he helped build an important cell of the Left Opposition, which included the above-quoted Abramovich and several other promising young revolutionaries.

The tide turned again, however, when the Chinese revolution was shattered under the blows of the very Kuomintang to which the Stalinist faction had subordinated the Chinese masses. On April 12, 1927, the military forces of Chiang Kai-Shek, with the full support of the Kuomintang, massacred members of the Chinese Communist Party in Shanghai and thousands of workers. On May 25, 1927, the United Left Opposition published another declaration, which was signed by thousands of party members, including hundreds of the best-known leaders from the seizure of power in 1917 and the Civil War.

However, the defeat of the Chinese Revolution strengthened the Soviet bureaucracy by reinforcing the international isolation of the USSR. The Stalinist faction, terrified by the recent successes of the Left Opposition and the continued prestige enjoyed above all by Leon Trotsky, used the demoralization and confusion created by the disaster in China to escalate its crackdown on the Opposition.

Known Left Oppositionists were demoted to positions that were well below their abilities or outside their field of expertise in order to both humiliate and politically neutralize them. Smilga was sent from Moscow to the Far East as head of the Economic Council. When his train departed from the Yaroslavsky Station in Moscow on June 9, 1927, he was accompanied to the station by a crowd of some 1,500 people, among them numerous leading oppositionists. Trotsky gave a speech citing Smilga's demotion as an example of reprisals against the Left Opposition.

On the eve of the XVth Party Congress, on November 14, 1927, Leon Trotsky was expelled from the party. On December 19, 1927, the Congress voted to expel all members from the party who had signed the latest platform of the United Left Opposition. Among them was Ivar Smilga.

Together with Christian Rakovsky, Karl Radek and Nikolai Muralov, he issued a statement on December 18, 1927. It included the following passages:

Expulsion from the party deprives us of our party rights, but it cannot free us from the duties which every one of us took on himself

in joining the ranks of the Communist Party. Being expelled from its ranks, we remain as before true to the programme of our party, its traditions, its banner. We shall work for the strengthening of the Communist Party and its influence on the working class. ... We pledged, and pledge ourselves now, to do our utmost for the preservation of unity of our party, which is at the head of a workers' state. We categorically reject the intention to organise a second party that is ascribed to us as being incompatible with the proletarian dictatorship and against Lenin's teachings. ... We reject just as emphatically the assertions concerning the anti-Soviet tendencies in our struggle. All of us, in one form or another, are partakers in the building up of the Soviet state, the first country of the toilers. ... We are being expelled for our views. They have been laid down in our platform and theses. We consider these views to be Bolshevik-Leninist views. We cannot renounce them because the march of events confirms their correctness. ... The party regime resulting in our expulsion inevitably leads to a new dismemberment in the party and to new expulsions. Only a regime of inner-party democracy can guarantee the elaboration of a correct party line and strengthen its ties with the working class. ... True to the teachings of Marx and Lenin, vitally connected with the CPSU and the Comintern, we reply to our expulsion from the CPSU by our firm decision to fight under the Bolshevik banner without restraint for the triumph of world revolution, for the unity of the Communist parties as the vanguards of the proletariat, for the defence of the conquests of the October Revolution, for communism, for the CPSU and the Comintern. [15]

The German Trotskyist Oskar Hippe, a member of the German Left Opposition since 1923, later noted in his memoirs:

If it had not been for the declaration of the comrades Smilga, Muralov, Rakovski, Radek and others, who also appealed to the delegates on December 18 at the XVth Party Congress, raising the voice of the internationalists, the ranks of those fighting for the Marxist-Leninist position would have hardly been as united as they were. ... The fight of the best parts of the Russian party, as it was expressed in their fundamental declaration at the XVth Party Congress, not only gave new courage to the Russian comrades, but was also perceived in the International as an encouragement in the struggle against the Stalinist faction. [16]

As for all Left Oppositionists, the expulsion was a heavy blow to Smilga, both politically and personally. His daughter, Tatiana Smilga-Poluyan, later recalled: "It was extremely difficult for father to deal with being expelled from the ranks of the Communists, which he had entered as a 14-year-old youth." [17]

The only way for Left Oppositionists to be readmitted to the party was to renounce their earlier views. Participation in oppositional activity was now a crime, punishable under Article 58 of the criminal code.

The defeat of the Chinese Revolution and the expulsion from the party provoked a deep crisis in the ranks of the United Left Opposition. Kamenev and Zinoviev were soon ready to capitulate to the Stalin faction. The meeting at which the United Left Opposition split occurred at Smilga's apartment. Isai Abramovich described it in his memoirs:

Zinoviev, Kamenev and their supporters agreed to accept the conditions for the capitulation that had been dictated [by the Central

Committee]. Trotsky and his co-thinkers agreed to concede that the factional struggle had been a mistake, but they categorically rejected the demand to renounce their views. The discussions about this among the members of the center of the opposition took place at the apartment of I. T. Smilga, in his study, at the big desk, with the Zinovievites sitting on one side and the Trotskyists on the other. Imiarekov, Brigis and I were sitting in the room next door and awaiting the results of the meeting. I. T. Smilga (he had, of course, come in a great hurry from the Far East) from time to time came out and briefly told us what was being discussed. At one point, after a speech by L. D. Trotsky, Ivar Tennisovich came to us and said with admiration, "What a figure!"

The meeting at which the split occurred ended. All participants, with the exception of K. Radek and Ch. Rakovsky, left. Nadezhda Vasilievna, Smilga's wife, invited all who had remained to come to the table, where discussion centered, of course, on the meeting that had just ended. They were especially upset about G. I. Zinoviev. Smilga declared that the behavior Zinoviev and Kamenev had displayed today reminded him of their behavior in October 1917. Radek and Rakovsky agreed. [18]

Shortly thereafter, Smilga was arrested and exiled to Minusinsk in the Soviet Union's Far East. At Smilga's request, Abramovich and his friend Imiarekov hid Smilga's personal archive and library with Riazanov, one of the leading experts on the writings of classical Marxism, who was at this point still in charge of the Institute of Marx and Engels. Throughout this time, Smilga suffered from severe health problems that dated back to his years in exile and the Civil War.

In 1929, Smilga co-signed a letter of capitulation in which he, Radek and Evgeny Preobrazhensky renounced their views and asked to be readmitted to the party. It was one in a series of capitulations by Old Bolsheviks in the Left Opposition following the regime's so-called "left turn" of 1928. Smilga was allowed to return to Moscow and resume work for the party, although at a very modest level.

Like many other Old Bolsheviks, Smilga maintained the illusion that the "left turn," which in Soviet economic policy included a commitment to industrialization and collectivization in the countryside—both policies for which the Left Opposition had fought for years—would mark a significant change in the class orientation of the policies of the Stalinist faction. Added to this illusionary hope were the exhaustion from the years-long struggles, the expulsion from the party, and the extremely difficult conditions facing all those who opposed the dominant party line.

Yet the hopes of the Left Oppositionists who capitulated to Stalin in the late 1920s were very soon shattered. The results of the "left turn" were nothing short of catastrophic, both within the Soviet Union and internationally.

In the Comintern, the left radicalism dictated from Moscow prevented a united struggle of Communist and Social Democratic workers in Germany against the rise of fascism, thus making possible the coming to power of Adolf Hitler in January 1933 without a single shot being fired. On the domestic front, the policy of forced collectivization led to a horrendous famine in the Ukrainian Soviet Republic, the southern parts of the Russian Republic and the Kazakh Soviet Republic, bringing particularly the Ukraine to the brink of civil war. Serious estimates put the number of those who died from the famine at around 7 to 8 million.

Abramovich, who had joined the "Declaration of the Three" and also capitulated to Stalin, frequented Smilga's apartment in Moscow in these years and later recalled:

At every meeting, Ivar Tennisovich talked about how the

collectivization was enforced with enormous distortions. He became ever more gloomy and started saying that our leaving the opposition had been a mistake—it only made Stalin more confident and arrogant. The politics of Stalin will result in devastating consequences for both the countryside and the cities, said Smilga. He was upset about the totally inhumane policy of de-kulakization, of which neither Lenin nor the party had ever conceived. ... And then, already proceeding from humanistic concerns to economic ones, Smilga the economist emphatically talked about how much the country's economy would have to pay for the absurd policy of the Stalinist collectivization. I remember almost word by word: "The losses in livestock resulting from the forced collectivization, in terms of value, exceed the equivalent of all the gains made in basic resources in the years of the first five-year plan. I. T. Smilga talked about how among the Old Bolsheviks the discontent was growing about the policies of both collectivization and industrialization, that at the work places discontent about the consequences of collectivization was rising. ... [19]

In 1932-1933, Smilga worked for the prestigious Academia Publishing House, which in these years became something of a refuge for former leading revolutionaries who had fallen out of favor with the Stalinist leadership. He edited and wrote forewords to works by Goethe, Erasmus, Saint-Simon, Kropotkin and Charles Dickens. In 1933, Smilga was sent to Tashkent to work in the Central Asian Gosplan. He returned to Moscow in 1934, but the party leadership refused to give him new work.

On December 1, 1934, the popular Leningrad party leader Kirov was killed in what was most likely a provocation arranged by the GPU on behalf of Stalin, who seized on the assassination as a pretext for the beginning of mass purges in the party. As a close confidant of Lenin, leader of the October Revolution and former Left Oppositionist, Smilga was one of the first to be arrested and killed.

He was taken from his home in the night of January 1-2, 1935, just a few weeks after Kirov's assassination, and sent to the Verkhneural'sk politisolator, a political prison in the Urals. His wife, Nadezhda Poluyan, who was also an old Bolshevik, would be arrested in 1936.

It is likely that Stalin intended to have Smilga as one of the defendants in the show trials that began in the summer of 1936. However, despite severe torture, Smilga would not "admit" to any of the crimes of which the Stalinist bureaucracy accused the revolutionary leaders, including collaboration with the fascist governments of Japan, Germany and Italy as well as counterrevolutionary activities with the aim of restoring capitalism in the USSR. On January 10, 1937, the Military Collegium of the Supreme Court of the USSR declared Smilga guilty of conducting "counterrevolutionary Trotskyist activity." He was sentenced to death and shot the same day.

His wife, Nadezhda Poluyan, was shot in Karelia (now part of Finland) 10 months later, on November 4, 1937. Her brothers, all long-time Bolsheviks and military leaders in the Civil War, were also killed in 1937 and 1938. Smilga's two daughters, Natasha and Tatiana, were arrested and sent to labor camps, where they lingered for many years before being released in the mid-1950s. Ivar Smilga was rehabilitated only half a century after his murder, on April 3, 1987. For decades, his name was banned from official Soviet—i.e., Stalinist—writings on the Russian Revolution and early Soviet Union.

Few Western historians have shown interest in establishing a truthful historical record of Smilga's role in the Russian Revolution. One of the first to acknowledge it was the American historian Alexander Rabinowitch, who detailed many of Smilga's positions and his collaboration with Lenin in his path-breaking study *The Bolsheviks Come to Power* from 1976. Much of the work and effort to rehabilitate Smilga

and set the historical record straight, after decades of falsifications, fell upon his daughter Tatiana, who tirelessly fought for her father's formal rehabilitation and his recognition as both a leader of the revolution in Russia and an opponent of Stalinism. Yet, as with virtually all leaders of the Russian Revolution, 100 years after the Bolshevik seizure of power, Smilga still awaits a serious biographer.

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Literature on Ivar Smilga and his role in the revolutionary movement:

Isai Abramovich, *Vospominaniia i vzgliady* (Memories and views), Moscow 2004. (Online available in Russian: <http://lib.ru/MEMUARY/ABRAMOWICH/abramowich2.txt>.)

A. P. Nenarokov, "Ivar Tenisovich Smilga," in: *Revvoensovet*, Moscow 1991, pp. 349-359.

Alexander Rabinowitch, *The Bolsheviks Come to Power*, Chicago 2009 (especially chapter 11).

Tatiana Smilga, *Moi otets, Ivar Smilga (My Father, Ivar Smilga)*, Moscow 2013.

WSWS: Interview with Tatiana Smilga-Poluyan (27 October, 2014).

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Endnotes

[15] Quoted from *Report of the XV Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Official Report with Decisions and Discussions*. Published by the Communist Party of Great Britain, London 1928, pp. 401-404.

[16] Oskar Hippe, *...und unsere Fahn'ist rot. Erinnerungen an sechzig Jahre in der Arbeiterbewegung [...and our flag is red. Memoirs of sixty years in the workers' movement]*, Hamburg 1979, pp. 106-7.

[17] Smilga, *Moi otets, Ivar Smilga*, Mp. 8.

[18] Abramovich, *Vosposminaniia i vzgliady*.

[19] Ibid.

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