

Vadim Rogovin and the sociology of Stalinism

By Andrea Peters
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September 18 marked the 20th anniversary of the death of the Soviet Marxist historian and sociologist, Vadim Zakharovich Rogovin. Were he still alive, he would be 81 years old.

Beginning in 1990, Rogovin started publishing what would become a seven-volume series about Stalinism and the socialist opposition, led by Leon Trotsky, to the bureaucratic degeneration of the USSR. It bore the title, *Was There an Alternative?* This series is an unsurpassed work of historical scholarship, and a major contribution to the fight against the falsification of history. Much of it was written as Rogovin was battling terminal cancer.

Was There an Alternative?, two volumes of which are available in English from Mehring Books (with another to be published shortly), demonstrates that the Great Purges of 1933–1938 were a form of political genocide, the primary aim of which was to exterminate Trotsky, Trotskyism, and all those political figures, intellectuals and workers with ties to the country's socialist heritage. Contrary to prevailing scholarship in both the Soviet Union and the West, Rogovin proved that Stalin's purges were not the workings of a madman or the inevitable outcome of the revolution, but the bureaucracy's bloody reaction to a powerful Marxist opposition.

Rogovin insisted that without understanding the Terror—its origins and its consequences—it was impossible to make sense of either the nature of Soviet society or the ultimate dissolution of the USSR at the hands of the Communist Party during the final decade of the 20th century. For him, 1936–1938 and 1989–1991 were indissolubly connected periods of Soviet history. The restoration of capitalism demanded new falsifications of Soviet history.

During the implementation of *perestroika*, the claim was widely made that the market represented a higher form of socialism, one which was inherently democratic, anti-bureaucratic and anti-Stalinist. This lie was necessary because there was no mass base of support for pro-capitalist reforms inside the USSR. Rather, as scholars Peter Reddaway and Dmitri Glinski have noted, in the period leading up to *perestroika* “dissent was widespread, concerned most of all with the gulf between rulers and ruled, and with obtaining social justice more than curbing, let alone dismantling, the socialist economy.”

In the introduction to the second volume in his series, *The State and the Opposition*, Rogovin noted:

A peculiarity of the counter-revolution realized by Stalin and his accomplices was that it took place under the ideological cover of Marxist phraseology and never-ending attestations of loyalty to the October Revolution... Naturally, such a counter-revolution demanded historically unprecedented conglomerations of lies and falsifications, the fabrication of ever-newer myths...

Similar to the Stalinists, modern anti-communists use two kinds of myths: namely, ideological and historical. Under ideological myths we have in mind false ideas, oriented to the future—that is, illusory prognoses and promises. These sorts of products of false consciousness reveal their mythological character by way of their

practical realization. Myths that appeal not to the future but to the past are another matter. In principle, it is easier to expose these myths than anti-scientific prognoses and reactionary projects. Like ideological ones, historical myths are a product of immediate class interests...products of historical ignorance or deliberate falsification—that is, the concealment of some historical facts, the tendentious exaggeration, and the distorted interpretation of others. Refuting these myths is only possible by rehabilitating historical truth—the honest portrayal of actual facts and tendencies of the past.

How did Rogovin come to write *Was There an Alternative?* A full answer to this question must await the first serious intellectual biography of Rogovin. Such an effort, no doubt, would bring to life the connections between the late Soviet scholar and the Russian Revolution, which he defended to the end. This article examines Rogovin's development within the field of Soviet sociology, and ultimately his fight against it.

Prior to writing *Was There an Alternative?*, Rogovin worked for many years, albeit under very difficult circumstances, on the sociological analysis of Stalinism. In 1977 he became a researcher at the prestigious Institute of Sociology in Moscow, after having studied and taught aesthetics during the first two decades of his career. Rogovin entered the field of sociology in order to find a setting in which he could investigate the problem of social inequality.

His interest in this question grew out of conclusions he drew in the aftermath of Nikita Khrushchev's official revelation of Stalin's crimes in a 1956 speech to the 20th party Congress, “On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences.” Rogovin, whose own grandfather perished in the purges, wanted to understand the social and political foundations of Stalin's bloodbath. After Stalin's death in 1953, he managed to gain access to old issues of *Pravda*, the official Communist Party newspaper, which were held in a highly restricted section of the library. They documented the political debates of the 1920s, and Trotsky's and the Left Opposition's bitter struggle against Stalin.

Trotsky insisted that Stalin stood at the head of a nationalist, bureaucratic reaction against the October revolution. Understanding the egalitarian and revolutionary strivings of the international working class as a mortal threat, the emerging Stalinist regime fought to secure its own privileged position, suppressed inner-party democracy, and betrayed revolutionary struggles around the world. Trotsky warned that unless the working class overthrew the bureaucracy, capitalism would be restored and the conquests of the October Revolution liquidated.

This critique convinced Rogovin that inequality was key to understanding the nature of the Soviet bureaucracy. He therefore focused his sociological research on stratification in lifestyles and consumption, in an effort to establish the relationship between government policy and social differentiation. He believed this would reveal the way in which the bureaucracy's defense of its own position deformed Soviet society.

Rogovin worked under extremely difficult conditions. The official definition of the Soviet social structure denied the very existence of the Communist Party elite. In addition to being the object of censorship,

Soviet sociology was dominated by a combination of empiricism and various strands of theoretical anti-Marxism. By the 1970s, the Soviet dissident movement, which emerged during the Khrushchev thaw, had shifted sharply to the right and become increasingly anti-Communist. Such positions repulsed Rogovin.

Most significantly, the Stalinist regime had physically exterminated Trotsky and the Left Opposition. It slaughtered the Old Bolsheviks and violently suppressed all those with a connection to the country's revolutionary socialist legacy. Rogovin's difficulties were rooted in history. It was impossible to openly declare oneself sympathetic to Trotskyism, much less state that one's research agenda was rooted in Trotsky's analysis of the USSR.

In addition, the ability of the Fourth International (FI), the world Trotskyist movement founded in 1938, to establish contact with Rogovin or others like him had been profoundly undermined by the damaging impact of Pabloism. This revisionist tendency, developed under the influence of Michel Pablo and Ernest Mandel, rejected the prospect of an independent, revolutionary movement of the working class developing in the USSR or anywhere else. The Pabloites argued that Trotskyists had to work for the reform of the Communist Party bureaucracy. Around the world, the Pabloites liquidated sections of the FI and instructed their cadre to work within existing Stalinist, social democratic and trade unionist movements. They rejected any effort to revive genuine Trotskyism in the Soviet bloc. During periods of revolutionary crisis in the USSR and Eastern Europe, they lent support to sections of the Communist Party bureaucracy, as well as nationalist and even right-wing forces. Thus, Rogovin worked largely in isolation.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, he and other sociologists conducted a number of studies on living conditions in the country that revealed profound contradictions within the USSR's socio-economic structure. In one respect, inequality had decreased in the Soviet Union; so-called wage-leveling restricted differentiation in *official* incomes—particularly in comparison to the high level it had reached during the 1930s and 40s under Stalin's rule—for the majority of the population. At the same time, however, a vast secondary system of legal, semi-legal and illegal distribution of goods, services and wealth was creating an array of inequalities across occupations, industries, party affiliation, geographical locations, age groups, etc. Significant portions of the population suffered from abject want. In 1983, a nationally representative survey with a sample size of 10,000 discovered that 1/3 of respondents lacked access to at least one, and in many cases *all*, basic utilities. Data on the incomes of the Communist Party bureaucracy were unpublished.

In his work, Rogovin insisted that the irrational and unjust way in which resources were allotted to different social layers was fueling individual efforts to improve living standards through other means—i.e., the shadow economy, bribery and corruption. This caused further social differentiation and growing social resentments.

In 1983, Rogovin penned a report that ended up in the hands of the Moscow Communist Party. Not all research at the Institute of Sociology was sent to the local authorities. Someone where Rogovin worked wanted his analysis brought to the attention of those higher up.

In this work, Rogovin argued that the fundamental problem facing the USSR was “a deepening of socially unjustified differentiation of incomes and the comforts of life.” “Workers regularly encounter instances of unearned enrichment through the deceit and the ripping-off of the state and the people. [...] Certain groups of the population have the means to meet their needs at a scale beyond any reasonable norms and outside of their relationship to social production. [...] There does not exist any systematic control of sources of income and the acquisition of valuable goods,” he wrote.

In a remarkable statement, inequality, he insisted, not wage-leveling, expressed “in essence, the social structure of [Soviet] society.”

Rogovin called for the implementation of income declarations, whereby people would be required to report the size of their total income, not just their official wages, so that the government and researchers might actually know the real distribution of earnings. He advocated for the establishment of a “socially-guaranteed *maximum* income” to combat “unjustified inequality.”

Elsewhere, Rogovin further argued that inequality lay at the center of the USSR's falling labor productivity. In a work co-authored with Nina Naumova, *Social Development and Societal Morals*, he maintained that the socio-economic crisis facing the USSR stemmed from the fact that inequality was growing in Soviet society; people worked poorly in the Soviet Union *not* because their work was inadequately remunerated relative to others, but because their commitment to social production had been eroded by intensifying social stratification that was unrecorded in official statistics.

In 1983, the very same year that Rogovin authored his critical report on the state of inequality in the USSR that ended up in the hands of the Moscow authorities, another sociologist, Tatyana Zaslavskaya, would issue a report, kept secret at first but later leaked to the Western press, advocating a transition to “economic methods of management,”—in other words, market-based reforms. A central aspect of this was policy centered around increasing inequality in workers' compensation in order to stimulate production. Zaslavskaya noted at the time that such reforms would be opposed by what she described as “the more apathetic, the more elderly, and the less qualified groups of workers.”

In a few years, Zaslavskaya would become a leading advisor to Mikhail Gorbachev and one of the main architects of the pro-market, *perestroika* reforms. In 1986, she was appointed the head of the Soviet Sociological Association. Her positions were widely embraced by the discipline.

In contrast, Rogovin's views were frequently, and ever more so, the object of sharp criticism. In 1985, a discussion occurred at the Institute of Sociology regarding a report produced by Rogovin and his research team about Soviet lifestyles. In it, Rogovin made openly critical comments about the anti-egalitarian impact of the shadow economy and the transfer of wealth through inheritance. It was sharply criticized by some of the Institute's top scholars, who both disagreed with its content and were nervous about the response it might get from the authorities. At the discussion, one such individual remarked:

The report by the author presented here has two basic failings: 1) it is inadequately self-critical; 2) the authors, and in particular, Rogovin himself, aren't appropriately thinking of the addressee to whom this report is directed. The report is going to the highest levels [of the Communist Party] and superfluous emotion is not necessary. The next criticism [I have] is about “unjustified inequality.” In principle, there can be no such thing.

[...] in the note to the TsK KPSS [Central Committee of the Communist Party] [...] the recommendations [that you make] demand the utmost care in how you approach them, particularly those that relate to the “third economy” and taxes on inheritance. [There should be] a minimum of categoricalness and a maximum of conciliatoriness.

As the decade wore on, Rogovin began to adopt an ever more critical stance on *perestroika*, whose devastating economic consequences were increasingly showing themselves. Rather than bringing prosperity to the masses, Gorbachev's reforms created a total crisis in the state sector of the economy, exacerbating widespread shortages in food, clothing and other basic necessities. Economic growth declined from 1986 onwards. In 1989, inflation reached 19 percent, eroding the gains the population had

made in income over the preceding years. As the scholar John Elliot noted, “When account is taken of additional costs, real per capita income and real wages probably decreased, particularly for the bottom half of the population. These costs included: deteriorating quality and unavailability of goods; proliferation of special distribution channels; longer and more time-consuming lines; extended rationing; higher prices and higher inflation-rates in non-state stores (e.g., collective farm market prices were nearly three times those in state stores in 1989); virtual stagnation in the provision of health and education; and the growth of barter, regional autarky, and local protectionism.”

Newly established private enterprises had great leeway to set prices because they faced little to no competition from the state sector. They charged whatever the market would bear, which led to substantial increases in income inequality and poverty, with the most vulnerable layers of the population hardest hit. The changes were so severe that Elliot insists that “income inequalities had actually become greater in the USSR than in the USA.” In the late 1980s, fully two-thirds of the Soviet population had an income that fell below the officially-recommended “decent level” of 100 to 150 rubles a month. At the same time, the shadow economy alone is estimated to have produced 100,000–150,000 millionaires in the late 1980s. By the early 1990s, one-quarter of the population or 70 million people were destitute according to official Soviet estimates. Miners’ strikes and other signs of social discontent erupted across the country.

Sociologists were intimately aware of the growing popular discontent. The Communist Party bureaucracy called upon them to help manage the situation. In 1989, the director of the Institute of Sociology received a request from the highest layers of the Communist Party. He was asked to respond to a letter from a rank-and-file party member that expressed extreme hostility towards the country’s “elites.” The letter writer described the party as dominated by an “opportunist nucleus” and called for the waging of a “class war” by the working masses against their policies. The ideology division of the Central Committee of the Communist Party wanted the Institute’s director to respond to the letter because the sentiments expressed in it were “widespread (representative) [sic] among the working class.”

In the midst of these circumstances, Rogovin came under fire in one of the country’s media outlets for articles he was writing against the promotion of social inequality. Since the mid-1980s, he had been championing the implementation of income declarations that would require people to report their full earnings, progressive taxes, and a socially-declared maximum income. Based on the amount of positive correspondence he was receiving from readers, it was clear that his views resonated with the population, a fact noted by Western scholars at the time. In a public press debate with the economist Gennady Lisichkin, the latter accused Rogovin of wanting to strengthen the hand of the bureaucracy and implied that he was a Stalinist. He was allegedly guilty of “Luddism,” religious-like preaching, misquoting Marx to find support for his arguments, wanting the state to have the power to move people around “like cattle,” defending a deficit-system of distribution based on “ration cards,” suffering from “left-wing” infantilism, and being a “demagogue” and a “war communist.” He attempted to link Rogovin to the very force to which he was most hostile—Stalinism. The head of the Soviet Sociological Association, Tatiana Zaslavskaya, openly endorsed Lisichkin’s positions.

The disagreements between Rogovin and other scholars over *perestroika* evolved into a fierce dispute about Soviet history and the nature of Stalinism. Rogovin identified a relationship between cheerleading for pro-market reforms and historical falsification. There was an increasingly widespread effort to link egalitarianism with Stalinism, the struggle for equality with political repression. In *Was There an Alternative?*, Rogovin frequently talked about the fact that the move

towards a market economy was accompanied by the propagation of myths about Soviet history. This was one of those myths.

In 1991, Zaslavskaya co-authored a book that claimed that the Soviet Union’s problems lay in the fact that in the late 1920s it abandoned the New Economic Policy (NEP), during which the government had loosened state control of the economy and restored market relations to an extent, in an effort to revitalize the economy under conditions of isolation, backwardness, and near economic collapse due to years of war. A one-sided and historically dishonest account of the NEP, this work did not contain any discussion of the political struggle that occurred during the NEP between Stalin and the Left Opposition over the malignant growth of inequality, the bureaucratization of the state and economy, and the crushing of inner-party democracy. The book skipped over this history because it would have cut across one of the central arguments made at the time in favor of *perestroika*—that market relations were inherently at odds with the interests of the Communist Party bureaucracy. The book’s account of labor policy under Stalin was also false. It insisted that during the 1930s revolutionary enthusiasm was the primary method used to stimulate people to work, ignoring the fact that income inequality rose substantially at this time. As the scholar Murray Yanowitch has pointed out, under Stalin “equality mongering” was labeled the brainchild of “Trotskyites, Zinovievites, Bukharinites and other enemies of the people.”

In the 1980s, sociologists and other scholars promoting *perestroika* sought to imbue these policies with a humanitarian mission, insisting that market reforms would allow “the human factor,” which had been crushed under the weight of bureaucratic stagnation, to rise again. The “human factor” was defined as man’s desire for personal recognition through differentiated, material reward. It was supposedly the primary driver of human activity. To the degree that official wage policy in the USSR led to a relatively egalitarian distribution of social resources with wages leveled-out between skilled and unskilled labor, it flew in the face of man’s desire for recognition of his own individual contribution. Rising inequality in income—necessitated by the demands of socio-economic development—was part of the process of “humanizing socialism.” The argument was made that increasing social stratification would ultimately provide real “socialist justice.”

As Tatiana Zaslavskaya claimed in 1990, “Despite all its limitations, the ‘classical’ market is, in fact, a democratic (and therefore anti-bureaucratic) economic institution. Within the framework of its exchange relationships, all participants are at least formally equal; no-one is subordinated to anyone else. Buyers and sellers act in their own interests and nobody can make them conclude deals they do not want to conclude. The buyers are free to select sellers who will let them have goods on the most advantageous terms, but the sellers too can chose buyers offering the best price.”

In making this argument, scholars relied upon the official Soviet definition of socialism—“from each according to his ability, to each according to his labor”—that was enshrined in the country’s 1936 constitution. This was also known as the Stalin constitution.

In 1988, Rogovin used the concept of the “human factor” to make a very different argument. In a piece entitled, “The Human Factor and the Lessons of the Past,” he insisted that the defense of social inequality by the Soviet elite was one of the key reasons why the “human factor” had degenerated in the USSR. The very best elements of “the human factor” had been crushed by Stalin during the Terror. Corruption, disillusionment, parasitism, careerism and individual self-promotion—the most distinctive features of the Brezhnev era—were the “human factor” created by Stalinism. In promoting inequality and the market, Rogovin insisted, *perestroika* did not mark a break with Stalinism or the legacy of the Brezhnev era, as was so often claimed, but rather their further realization.

One year later he wrote, “The adherents of the new elitist conceptions

want to see Soviet society with such a level of social differentiation that existed under Stalin but having gotten rid of Stalinist repression. It is forgotten that the debauched character of these repressions [...] flowed from the effort to not simply restrain, but rather physically annihilate above all those forces in the party and in the country that, though silenced, rejected the social foundations of Stalinism.”

After years of studying these questions in near-total isolation, Rogovin was finally able to write openly about this subject. He tested the waters by first publishing “L.D. Trotsky on Art” in August 1989 in the journal *Theater*. It was followed shortly thereafter by an article entitled “The Internal Party Struggles of the 1920s: Reasons and Lessons,” also published in a journal outside of his discipline, *Political Education*. Moving closer to a forum likely to be followed by his colleagues in sociology, in early 1990 Rogovin published “L.D. Trotsky on NEP” in *Economic Sciences*. And finally, a few months later, “L.D. Trotsky on Social Relations in the USSR” came out in the flagship journal of his discipline, *Sociological Research*.

Rogovin’s first article on the subject within his discipline reviewed Trotsky’s role in Soviet history during the 1920s and summarized his seminal work, *The Revolution Betrayed*. It made clear to whom Rogovin fundamentally owed the views he had been advancing over the course of the previous decade.

Trotsky, however, continued to be vilified by Soviet officialdom. In 1987, on the 70th anniversary of the Russian Revolution, Gorbachev described Trotsky as “the arch-heretic of Soviet history, an ‘excessively self-assured politician who always vacillated and cheated.’”

As a result of Rogovin’s profound sympathies for Trotskyism and efforts to place his work in the tradition of the Left Opposition’s critique of Stalinism, he was increasingly isolated from his colleagues, several of whom entered the Yeltsin administration and helped facilitate the eventual implementation of shock therapy, a key component of capitalist restoration in Russia. His discipline never forgave him for his intransigence and principles. One will find almost no mention of Rogovin or his contributions in the numerous monographs and other publications that have come out over the last 20 years about sociology in the USSR.

But Rogovin’s isolation from Soviet sociology did not undermine his capacity to work. Rather, it coincided with the start of the publication of *Was There an Alternative?* In 1992, Rogovin met the International Committee of the Fourth International, and established a close political and intellectual relationship with the world Trotskyist movement that would intensify over the course of the next several years. This relationship was the basis upon which Rogovin made his immense contribution to the fight to defend Trotsky and historical truth. Two recently republished tributes to Rogovin by David North review this history.

Despite his death twenty years ago, through his work Rogovin continues his struggle to arm the working class with historical consciousness.

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