

Vadim Rogovin's *Bolsheviks against Stalinism 1928–1933: Leon Trotsky and the Left Opposition*

A magnificent account of Stalin's opponents in the USSR

By Andrea Peters
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“It may well be that the historical period examined in our book has been subjected to the most biased assessments. In countless journal articles, Stalin’s ‘great breakthrough’ was declared to be either the natural continuation of the revolutionary strategy of Bolshevism, or interpreted as Stalin’s turn to ‘Trotskyism’... From a priori conceptions about the organic continuity between Bolshevism and Stalinism, also came the version of the absolutely arbitrary nature of Stalin’s repressions. This version was shared (although for different reasons in principle) by both Stalinists and anti-communists, who considered that the political regime created by the October Revolution had not undergone degeneration. The adherents of this version did not connect the Stalinist terror with the logic of the inner-party struggle, which compelled Stalin to answer the growing protest within the party against his policies with monstrous counterblows. In 1928–1933, this process was still far from complete.”—Vadim Rogovin (p.492)

The publication in English of *Bolsheviks against Stalinism 1928–1933: Leon Trotsky and the Left Opposition* by the Soviet Marxist historian and sociologist Vadim Rogovin (1937–1998) is a major political and intellectual event. The second book in Rogovin’s seven-volume series *Was There an Alternative* is a magnificent account of the political struggle waged by Stalin’s opponents in the USSR in the years following Leon Trotsky’s exile and up to Adolf Hitler’s conquest of power. It demonstrates that Stalin’s rise was neither foreordained nor a natural outgrowth of the October Revolution. Rather, the Great Russian chauvinist and bureaucrat secured power in ferocious conflict with the proletariat, peasantry and cadre of the revolutionary socialist movement.

Rogovin produced this volume and six others in the final years of his life as he simultaneously battled terminal cancer. For several decades Rogovin worked as a sociologist studying living conditions in the USSR. He was drawn to this subject because he wanted to investigate the scale, scope and origins of stratification in the Soviet Union. Having clandestinely found his way to the work of Trotsky and the Left Opposition (LO), Rogovin became convinced that social inequality was the key to understanding Stalinism.

In the early 1990s, Rogovin’s decades-long political isolation from the world Trotskyist movement finally came to an end when he made contact with the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI). *Bolsheviks Against Stalinism* was Rogovin’s first work written in close political collaboration with the ICFI and marks a key moment in his development as a Marxist historian.

A short book review cannot convey the depth and complexity of this fascinating, 500-page volume. *Bolsheviks Against Stalinism* is high drama. It interweaves primary and secondary sources—published speeches

and articles, personal correspondence, media reports, archival documents, personal memoirs, historical accounts and even novels—to take the reader through the twists and turns of a five-year period of Soviet history in a series of short and focused chapters that address the economic crises, political problems and social conditions that drove Stalin’s policies and led to the continual eruption of opposition. It is an exploration of the human material of the Bolshevik party, as it alternately confronted, was swept along by, participated in and challenged a massive nationalist, bureaucratic reaction to the Russian Revolution.

One of the book’s key findings is that arrests, expulsions and exile were not enough to shatter the influence of Trotsky and the Left Opposition. These forces continued to exert immense sway over the political life of the country and shaped the new, oppositional forces emerging in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Thus, *Bolsheviks Against Stalinism* illuminates the political logic driving Stalin’s turn to mass exterminations during the Great Purge; Trotsky and the Left Opposition represented an unrelenting threat to the bureaucracy that could only be contained with physical violence.

When the working class of Russia overthrew the combined forces of Tsarism and capitalism bringing the Bolsheviks to power in the fall of that year, the revolution immediately faced enormous difficulties. World War I had physically devastated Russia, which was mired in poverty and backwardness. The social democrats of Europe had betrayed the struggles of their own working classes and the young revolution found itself isolated. It simultaneously had to combat, across a vast landmass, the counter-revolutionary forces of imperialism, which sought to destroy the victory of Russia’s masses and prevent the revolution from extending across the globe.

The Russian revolution prevailed against all odds. But even as the Soviet Union formed itself, a bureaucracy began to emerge within the country that was dedicated not to the Marxist program of world revolution but to building “socialism in one country.” Joseph Stalin stood at its helm. Taking advantage of the exhaustion and isolation of the Soviet working class, this rising apparatus used its position as the administrator of the country’s economy and political institutions to secure for itself special privileges.

The incipient Stalinist bureaucracy was organically hostile to world revolution. It instinctively grasped that if the working masses came to power elsewhere, the working class within the Soviet Union would wage combat against a parasitic elite feeding off the conquests of the world’s first-ever workers’ state. Therefore, in pursuit of its policies, the bureaucracy betrayed revolutions abroad and crushed inner-party democracy within the Soviet Communist Party and the Communist

International. In his last years Lenin anticipated the dangers posed by this bureaucratic tendency and fought against them. He was joined by Leon Trotsky, his co-leader of the Russian revolution. When Lenin was incapacitated by strokes in 1923 and finally died in 1924, Trotsky continued this struggle along with other members of the Bolshevik Party, forming the Left Opposition (LO) in 1923.

Rogovin places Trotsky's writings and those published in the Left Opposition's *Bulletin of the Opposition* at the center of this volume, making clear that they are the key to unlocking the period's history. Articles, commentary and correspondence from Trotsky and the *Bulletin*, which were often written by oppositionists in the USSR working underground and then circulated in secret, contain remarkable insights into the character of Soviet society and outline a thoroughgoing critique of Stalinism. Of all the oppositional tendencies that emerged in the Soviet Union, it was only the "alternative of the Left Opposition"—as Rogovin characterizes it—that was capable of fundamentally challenging and defeating Stalinism.

When *Bolsheviks Against Stalinism* was first published in Russian in 1993, the material covered in it would have been new to the Soviet reader. Trotsky had been removed from official annals of Soviet history. Rogovin's emphasis on the distinctiveness and importance of the Left Opposition was, and remains today, an open rebuke to the falsifiers of Soviet history of all political stripes. He was waging a battle against the powerful Communist Party bureaucracy and its supporters in the intelligentsia, who were—with the aid of historical falsification—restoring capitalism in the face of mounting social opposition.

In 1989, for instance, a letter sent to Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev by a rank-and-file party member set off alarm bells. The ideology division of the Communist Party said the sentiments expressed in the letter were known to be "widespread (representative) among the working class." The letter writer described the Communist Party as made up of "opportunists," "elites" and bourgeois "born-againers." It called for the working class to "take matters into its own hands as the head of its own party" in order to lead a "class war." The same year, massive miners' strikes erupted in the country. Armed with the knowledge of their own history, Rogovin understood that the Soviet working class could be an unstoppable force.

Bolsheviks Against Stalinism begins with the economic crisis of 1927 and the proceedings of the 15th Congress of the Communist Party, held in December of that year. The failure of the Stalin leadership to make changes to the New Economic Policy (NEP) led precisely to the problems predicted by the Left Opposition—a grain crisis, whereby peasants refused to part with their harvest because the cities were unable to produce goods needed on the countryside. NEP allowed for state-regulated production for profit in manufacturing and agriculture. The result was the emergence of well-to-do layers in the cities (NEPmen) and countryside (kulaks, in other words, better-off sections of the peasantry). While the policy kickstarted the economy, it proved unable to resolve the problems in the country's industrial sector, whose development lagged.

The book describes how the Communist Party, under the leadership of Stalin and Bukharin, responded to the economic crisis by stepping up attacks on the Left Opposition with arrests and exile and a relentless campaign of denunciations. Being active in the Left Opposition had become not just grounds for expulsion from the party, but was illegal according to Article 58 of the criminal code. While the concept of "forced pressure on the kulaks" was first formulated in the lead-up to the 15th Congress by Bukharin, Rogovin notes that coming out of the Congress this was not official policy, which continued to be committed to the preservation of NEP.

But when the grain crisis exploded in early 1928 and famine threatened the cities, the Politburo careened in the direction of "emergency measures" to force peasants to turn over their harvest. Rogovin argues that Stalin's direct involvement was decisive in driving forward the

repressions. He issued orders that contravened the decisions of the party congress and Soviet law. The result was rising discontent in the countryside and metastasizing economic problems, which Stalin sought to blame on the excesses of local officials and the alleged sabotage of "bourgeois elements." Directives were issued in secret, as fear grew within the Stalin leadership that the Trotskyists, who had already been making a powerful critique of the emergency measures in the *Bulletin of the Opposition* and continued to have influence in party cells and workplaces, would gain from the regime's failures.

This pattern of economic crises and wild improvisations, coupled with scapegoating of lower-level party officials and state administrators, gross violations of Soviet legality, the denunciation and repression of opponents, rule through secret decrees and violence aimed at key segments of the population, would repeat itself continually in the coming years, ultimately escalating into forced collectivization and mass purges.

As 1929 unfolded, the Stalinist bureaucracy continued its efforts to stamp out opposition, with special divisions of the secret services established to search out "rightists" (those who advocated that restrictions on the market economy be loosened) and Trotskyists in party bodies and at scientific research and educational institutions. This corresponded with the shift from "emergency measures" to full-scale forced collectivization. In December 1929, using a formulation that had not previously been accepted by the party, Stalin called for "dekulakization."

Bolsheviks Against Stalinism highlights the powerful critique made of forced collectivization and its inevitable consequences by Trotsky and the Left Opposition, and traces out the different stages of the "civil war" against the peasantry, documenting in detail the methods used, the violent responses of the villages, the desperate efforts of local party bodies to carry out reckless and impossible measures, the extraordinary human suffering that resulted—including famines in Ukraine and elsewhere that took the lives of millions—and the efforts by Stalin to cover up the state's crimes and blame the disaster on the peasants themselves, as well as underlings and political opponents.

The volume investigates the toll exacted from the working masses due to collectivization and Stalin's frenzied drive for industrialization based on fantastical demands that the Soviet Union outstrip its own planned development targets. The spread of piecework, production speed-up, food rationing in the cities, growing wage inequality, punitive restrictions on labor turnover, all contributed to falling living conditions for masses of workers and a growing gap between them and the privileged bureaucrats allied to the Stalin regime. Addressing the social foundations of Stalinism, Rogovin rejects:

... the favorite thesis of contemporary "democrats" that Stalin expressed the interest of new layers of the uneducated and de-politicized working class formed in the years of the first Five-Year Plan, and that the "lumpen who yearned for egalitarianism" had become the social base of support for Stalin's regime. In actuality, it was precisely on these new layers of the Soviet working class, making up its least skilled segment, that the burden of Stalin's repressive labor legislation fell particularly heavily, as it relentlessly toughened the sanctions for "violations of labor discipline." (p 283)

One of the most remarkable chapters in the book, "The Social and Class Meaning of the 'Great Breakthrough,'" discusses the origins of Stalinism. Rogovin takes on the claims of those who argue that Stalinism emerged solely in the aftermath of NEP, when rapid industrialization and forced collectivization took hold. He insists that the NEP actually laid the groundwork for a massive growth in the bureaucracy, as a huge

administrative apparatus charged with overseeing distribution and managing class relations was necessary in order to regulate the market economy that had been legalized in cities and on the countryside. Stalin and his allies cultivated this burgeoning bureaucracy by ensuring its access to privileges. This was accompanied by a political and ideological attack on the principle of equality. While initially accommodating and encouraging the growth of well-to-do peasants in the villages and petty bourgeois layers in the cities, the bureaucracy ultimately came into sharp conflict with them, as the full-scale restoration of capitalism would have undermined its own power and privileges.

The sharp twists and turns in official policy and their calamitous consequences, the extreme social tensions building in the country and the crushing of inner-party democracy called forth waves of discontent, criticism and opposition from within the Communist Party, even from those layers who had previously played a central role in purging the Left Opposition. At times, this took the form of organized efforts that raised the necessity of removing Stalin from power. Other times it manifested as hostile moods and views broadly pervasive in party bodies, workplaces and institutions.

Rogovin introduces readers to Stalin's veteran opponents and those drawn into struggle during the five years covered in his book, excavating their political biographies. He characterizes in detail their political programs, assesses their strengths and weaknesses, considers their attitude to Trotskyism, and documents their political fates.

In the recounting the history of the oppositional forces in the USSR, Nikolai Bukharin figures prominently in the book. An old Bolshevik, close comrade of Lenin's and "rightist" who had advocated the further extension of market relations, Bukharin had been Stalin's close ally in the suppression of the Trotskyists. By mid-July 1928, however, he was probing the possibility of an alliance with former oppositionists Kamenev and Zinoviev, who had recently renounced their criticisms and been brought back to Moscow. Kamenev described Bukharin's views as ones of "absolute hatred" and "absolute rupture" with Stalin, combined with hysteria. Rogovin notes, "[He] had no precise and consistent political program or clear idea about what methods to use in fighting against Stalin. He was in a panic and in the grip of conflicting moods that followed one after the other." (p. 59)

Over the course of the subsequent five years, Bukharin would repeatedly raise stinging rebukes of Stalin's policies, methods and distortions of socialist theory, but prove unable to mount any consistent and principled fight. He vacillated, acting at times as a slavish supporter of Stalin and toeing the party line. All the while he sought allies, engaged in political skullduggery and draped his criticisms of Stalin in the mantle of anti-Trotskyism. None of this worked to his advantage. The charge of "enemy of the people" was first directed against Bukharin and he was persecuted as a "right deviationist." Rogovin's analysis of the political history of the "right opposition," why there was no "right-left" oppositional bloc and Bukharin's unraveling is detailed and compelling.

The political blows Stalin delivered against his opponents did not, however, resolve any of the crises that gripped the Soviet Union. Opposition to his rule continued to emerge, from both old and new quarters, and even among those routed by Stalin, expelled from the party, demoted, arrested and exiled. The reader will learn about these oppositional tendencies, the figures involved, their demands, their documents, their efforts to establish contact with one another, their origins in different layers of society, their attitude toward the Left Opposition and how the Stalinist apparatus sought to handle them.

In September 1930, for instance, workers from Podolsk met with representatives from Moscow's largest factories and sent a letter to three leading Bolsheviks in which they denounced "Stalin's unrestrained, autocratic rule" and threatened an appeal to the masses. Around the same time, an oppositional group formed around Sergei Syrtsov, a leading party

and state official, and drew in other top figures in a self-declared "right-ultraleft bloc," which was in contact with political figures extremely close to Stalin. In 1932, the Union of Marxist-Leninists, organized by M.N. Riutin and V.N. Kaiurov, produced a lengthy document, "Stalin and the Crisis of Proletarian Dictatorship." Rogovin uses the Riutin platform throughout the book and makes a careful analysis of the political character of the document, considering what it expressed about the outlook of the forces marshaling against Stalin and their attitudes towards the Left Opposition.

Bolsheviks against Stalinism makes clear that Stalinism was in constant political crisis, as the growth of the bureaucracy, the strangling of Soviet democracy, the intense exploitation of the working class and the war against the peasantry came into conflict with the Soviet Union's revolutionary socialist traditions and cadre. Rogovin writes:

Stalin's familiarity with the "Riutin platform"; with letters from the USSR published in the *Bulletin of the Opposition*; with investigative materials and agents' reports from the GPU, recording the activity and moods of old and new opposition groups—all this showed that not only many former oppositionists were sharply against his policy, but even many communists who had not participated in the 1920s in any oppositions, and who had voted "unanimously" at official party meetings. (p. 424)

Not even the mass purges during this period, which saw 800,000 people driven out of the Communist Party, could stabilize the regime. The Left Opposition, working in exile, fought to establish contact with oppositional tendencies developing inside the USSR. The stage was set for the Great Terror, which Rogovin deals with in his subsequent volumes in the series.

The book also contains a fascinating discussion of the agenda that drove the post-Stalin rehabilitations of Stalin's victims during Khrushchev's reign and later. While certain truths were admitted, new falsifications were developed in order to deny that there existed genuine opponents of Stalin and a fundamental alternative to his rule. One of the most interesting features of this volume is Rogovin's ability to explain to the reader the contemporary political and historiographical debates surrounding Soviet history.

For instance, Rogovin writes:

At the end of the 1980s, the majority of works devoted to a critique of Stalinism paid attention to its extremely cruel repressive side, but did not reveal its common, everyday appearance, expressed in striking social contrasts...The bearer of these tendencies wished that the result of "perestroika" would be a society with social differentiation that would be just as strong as it was under Stalin, but that would avoid Stalin's repressive measures...The ideological and psychological heritage of Stalinism was deeply rooted in the consciousness of those who, in the years of stagnation and "perestroika," were inclined to cultivate moods of elitism, clannishness, and a caste mentality that had been widespread in Stalin's time. (p. 296)

The final chapters of *Bolsheviks against Stalinism* deal with Hitler's coming to power in Germany, the responsibility of the Stalinist bureaucracy for this crime, and the response of the Left Opposition. Trotsky would call for the formation of a new communist international in 1933, which he achieved with the founding of the Fourth International in 1938. The internationalism of the LO was distinctive and what allowed

the movement to be the most intransigent, unwavering opponent of Stalin. The monstrous domestic policies implemented under Stalin, the growth of a privileged bureaucracy, the attack on social equality, the suppression of inner-party democracy, all of these flowed, Trotsky insisted, from Stalin's rejection of world revolution and promotion of Russian nationalism.

Apart from this crucial episode, international events are not the focus of *Bolsheviks against Stalinism*, which concentrates on the history of Stalinism and the oppositions within the Soviet Union's borders. As Rogovin's thinking evolved in the coming years due to his close political relationship with the International Committee of the Fourth International, he would devote ever-greater attention to Stalinism's battle against world revolution in the subsequent five volumes of his series, *Was There an Alternative?*

Rogovin's achievement with *Bolsheviks against Stalinism* is difficult to overstate. He combines innovative research with a penetrating and a dramatic retelling of history. He restores Trotsky and the Left Opposition to their rightful place in the Soviet history. Readers who come into contact with this work will be deeply moved—in all senses of the word, politically, psychologically, intellectually—to seek out the full truth of the struggle against the Stalinist counter-revolution.

Bolsheviks Against Stalinism 1928–1933; Leon Trotsky and the Left Opposition is available here from Mehring Books.

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