

This week in history: September 18-24

17 September 2023

25 years ago: Vadim Rogovin dies

On September 18, 1998, Vadim Zakharovich Rogovin, the Russian Marxist historian and sociologist, and author of a monumental six-volume study of the Trotskyist opposition to the rise of the Stalinist regime within the USSR, died of cancer in Moscow. He was 61 years old.

A Doctor of Philosophical Sciences and leading researcher at the Institute of Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow, Rogovin was among the most highly regarded sociologists in the Soviet Union. In sharp contrast to virtually all his academic colleagues, Rogovin did not renounce his Marxist and socialist convictions during the years of *Perestroika* and in the aftermath of the collapse of the USSR.

Rogovin declared openly that he was an adherent of Trotskyism and embarked upon the intellectual project that was to occupy him during the last decade of his life: writing the history of the Marxist opposition to Stalinism within the Soviet Union between 1923 and 1940. The first volume, *Was There An Alternative?*, was published in 1992; and the second volume, *Power and Opposition*, (published English as *Bolsheviks Against Stalinism, 1928-1933*) appeared one year later.

Rogovin's activities were not confined to research and writing. In 1993 he made contact with the International Committee of the Fourth International with which he developed a close political and intellectual relationship, and with whose program he publicly declared his solidarity. Between 1995 and 1998, he delivered lectures organized by the International Committee in the United States, Britain, Germany and Australia.

In May 1994—during the writing of the third volume in his planned history, *Stalin's Neo-NEP*, which placed the regime's preparation for the purges in the context of its repudiation of the egalitarian principles of the Bolshevik Revolution—Rogovin underwent surgery for cancer of the colon. The surgeons discovered that the disease had already spread to the liver and warned that Rogovin would be fortunate if he lived for another year.

Despite the grim prognosis, Rogovin intensified his intellectual efforts, completed the third volume, and decided to expand the scope of his project. Initially, he had planned to complete the historical study in four volumes. However, as access to previously closed archival material placed a wealth of new documents at his disposal, Rogovin concluded that his work could not be completed in less than seven volumes.

In the face of extraordinary physical adversity, Rogovin completed six of the planned seven volumes. Volume four, *1937: Stalin's Year of Terror*, was published in 1996; volume five, *The Party of the Executed*, (English title *Political Genocide in the USSR*) appeared in 1997; and volume six, *World War and World Revolution*, was published in Russian in 1998, the year of his death. By that time, Rogovin was already drafting chapters of volume seven.

50 years ago: Skylab 3 mission concludes

On September 24, 1973, astronauts aboard the NASA space station Skylab concluded their experiments and made their final preparations to return to earth. "Skylab 3" was the second manned mission to the Skylab station, with "Skylab 1" having been the mission that launched the station into orbit on May 14, 1973.

Skylab 2 launched shortly after on May 25 with the crew staying aboard for 28 days. This beat the previous record of 24 days set by Soviet astronauts on the Salyut space station in 1971. The crew of Salyut tragically did not survive reentry to earth due to a malfunction causing their spacecraft to become depressurized.

Launched on July 28, 1973, Skylab 3 smashed the previous records with the crew of Alan L. Bean, Owen K. Garriott, and Jack Lousma staying in orbit over the earth for 59 days and 11 hours. This came despite a number of problems early in the mission that nearly forced the crew to abandon the station and make an early return to earth.

Once the astronauts had docked it was discovered that one of the thrusters on the crew's transport vessel had become damaged. A second Apollo spaceship was readied to launch a rescue mission; however, after working with the ground control team it was determined that the crew could make a safe return with the two still-functional thrusters.

Another early setback came 30 hours after launch when a power failure caused most of the station's systems to go temporarily offline. The crew had brought with them a number of mice and insects to study the effects of space on animals. However, they did not survive the power failure and the experiments were abandoned.

One exception however was two spiders that had been brought to the space station and survived long enough for the crew to restore normal power. The spiders were found to be capable of adapting themselves to a zero gravity environment and maintained the ability to construct webs.

A major area of research was on the astronauts themselves. The crew conducted examinations of one another to test the effects of extended spaceflight on human beings. The phenomenon of "puffy face syndrome" in astronauts was studied, showing that in a zero gravity environment fluids are more evenly dispersed, with more than normal amounts traveling to the face and head, causing the face to appear more rounded, while the legs become thinner as less fluids are pooled there without gravity.

Skylab 3 installed an array of six telescopes on the space station, making it possible to capture the highest quality images of the sun up to that time. The new telescopes were able to observe the Sun over a range of the electromagnetic spectrum and capture solar phenomena like bursting gases and collect information about the sun's atmosphere.

The space station also captured images of the earth. Particularly the United States was examined, to create new geological maps that could be used for managing natural resources, studied crop conditions, and measuring storm patterns.

One final Skylab mission would be launched in November to continue the research. That mission, Skylab 4, would go on to further break the spaceflight record with the crew remaining in space for 84 days.

75 years ago: Indonesian nationalists suppress popular uprising in Madiun

On September 18, 1948, rebels in Madiun, East Java, launched an uprising directed against the attempts of the dominant nationalist forces in Indonesia to establish a conservative bourgeois state. The uprising and its brutal suppression were the sharpest expression of longstanding conflicts among those forces engaged in the fight against Dutch colonial rule.

In August 1945, in the concluding stages of World War II, Indonesian nationalists led by Sukarno and Mohammad Hatta declared independence. That was promulgated as the Japanese, who had conquered the archipelago, suffered defeat. The Dutch, backed by the other imperialist powers, immediately took action to regain control of their old colonial possession.

The ensuing struggle would involve a broad-based popular war against the Dutch forces, spanning four-and-a-half years. The Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) played a prominent role, and its members held positions in the first post-colonial government. They were ousted in January 1948, as Hatta sought to consolidate a conservative government. The removal of the Stalinist leaders was accompanied by attempts to demobilize irregular guerilla units and replace them with the newly established Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI).

The PKI and more radical nationalist forces were hostile to the major concessions made by Sukarno and Hatta in the Renville Agreement. The pact granted Dutch forces de facto control over large swathes of the archipelago, until full independence, which was pushed off into the indefinite future. The Dutch repeatedly breached agreements, including breaking ceasefires.

The PKI, feeling that it was being sidelined, developed a People's Democratic Front with other leftist parties. On September 18, Democratic Front forces took over public buildings and military headquarters in Madiun, one of their last strongholds. The initiative was taken by a PKI-influenced militia leader named Soemarsono.

The extent to which senior PKI leaders, especially Munawar Musso, were aware of the plans remains unclear. Hatta immediately denounced the revolt as an attempt to overthrow the Indonesian Republic and to establish a Soviet government. He and Sukarno would preside over a protracted military offensive, which included unleashing the TNI to kill Musso and other PKI leaders. Amir Sjarifuddin, who had served as prime minister in a previous republican government, was executed. The killings occurred even as it was clear that the PKI leaders and left-wing Republicans were seeking to rein in the rebels. In effect, Hatta and Sukarno used the rebellion as the pretext for a sweeping purge.

The PKI was completely unprepared. Based on the Stalinist perspective of a two-stage revolution, it rejected the struggle for workers' power, instead insisting that the bourgeoisie had a progressive role to play in the revolution. In practice, that program entailed subordinating the masses to various bourgeois leaders, even as they were shifting to the right, and paving the way for military repression.

100 years ago: Communist Party leads insurrection in Bulgaria

On September 23, 1923, the Communist Party of Bulgaria led an uprising of workers and peasants in Bulgaria to overthrow the right-wing government of Aleksandar Tsankov, which had come to power in a military coup in June and overthrown the peasant-populist government of Aleksandar Stamboliyski.

The Communist Party of Bulgaria (CPB), which had deep roots in the

working class and among the poorest layers of the peasantry, took a neutral and passive stance on the June coup, a position that was roundly criticized by the Communist International and compared to the passivity of the German Communist Party during the Kapp Putsch of 1920.

As a corrective, the CPB began to prepare an insurrection without fully estimating the new situation and relationship of class forces. Plans for the insurrection had been captured by the government and over 2,000 communists had been arrested on September 12. Premature risings took place on September 17.

The BCP was able to seize about 50 towns and villages on September 20, but not any large cities. No rising had even been planned in the capital, Sofia.

The insurrection spread on September 23, but was suppressed partly because the government, with the aid of the social democrats, was able to control the railways. The military, with the assistance of detachments of Russian White Guards in exile, were able to quell the insurrection. In the days and weeks that followed, nearly 5,000 workers and peasants were murdered in a reign of terror.

In *Lessons of October*, Trotsky, summing up in 1924 the problems of the world revolution and the role of revolutionary leadership, remarked that the events in Bulgaria resembled those in Germany in October.

Last year we met with two crushing defeats in Bulgaria. First, the party let slip an exceptionally favorable moment for revolutionary action on account of fatalistic and doctrinaire considerations. (That moment was the rising of the peasants after the June coup of Tsankov.) Then the party, striving to make good its mistake, plunged into the September insurrection without having made the necessary political or organizational preparations. The Bulgarian revolution ought to have been a prelude to the German revolution. Unfortunately, the bad Bulgarian prelude led to an even worse sequel in Germany itself.



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