

Arsenii Borisovich Roginskii (1946–2017)

Arsenii Borisovich Roginskii died on December 18, 2017 in Israel, where he had been receiving treatment for cancer. Roginskii was born on March 30, 1946 in Vel'sk, in the Arkhangelsk region, where his family lived in internal exile following his father's arrest in the 1930s. In 1951, Roginskii's father suffered a second arrest and soon died in prison. His father's experience with Stalin's terror left an indelible mark on Roginskii. Out of the roots of this childhood trauma, however, grew not hatred, but boundless curiosity about the history of political and intellectual resistance to Tsarist and Soviet regimes. Roginskii's interest found fertile ground at Tartu University, a haven for free thought in Soviet times. As a student in Estonia starting in 1962, Roginskii's intellectual thirst was nurtured by seminars with the cultural historian and semiotician Iurii Lotman. By the end of his studies, Roginskii had begun to publish his historical studies on the nineteenth-century Decembrist movement and had developed a passion for archival research.

In Leningrad in the late 1960s, Roginskii embraced a life of intellectual freedom. A charismatic figure, he was a valued guest in numerous circles, socializing with equal ease with academics and poets, *samizdatchiki* and old Mensheviks. The doors of official scholarship remained closed to him, but he progressively fashioned his professional life around his passion for historical research. From 1970 to 1979, he taught Russian language at an evening school, while dedicating his days to the exploration of past revolutionary movements. With the silent support of several academics who admired his talent and perhaps envied his freedom, Roginskii skillfully navigated the Leningrad and Moscow archives.

Roginskii was also involved in the circulation and collection of *samizdat*. In particular, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* made a strong impression on the young man and his peers. When his friends Sergei Dediulin and Valerii Sazhin turned to Roginskii in 1975 with the proposal to create a self-published historical periodical, he did not hesitate long, despite the risks involved in any kind of independent collective initiative. In the following months, the informal editorial team broadened to include a Moscow nucleus consisting of Aleksandr Daniel', Larisa Bogoraz, Dmitrii Zubarev, and Aleksei Korotaev, as well as a Leningrad center comprised of, in addition to the three founders, Feliks Perchenok and Aleksandr Dobkin. Between 1976 and 1982, five issues of the historical collection *Pamiat'* (Memory) would appear in samizdat; from 1978 onwards the journal would be published in *tamizdat* in New York and Paris.

As the informal editor-in-chief of *Pamiat'*, however, Roginskii was first in line when the KGB decided to strike. In 1977, he was subjected to a first house search. Two years later, when the whole team was targeted, Roginskii was dismissed from his teaching position. In April 1981, he was summoned to the OVIR (the emigration services), where he was given ten days to decide whether to emigrate or await arrest. Roginskii chose the threat of imprisonment over the certainty of exile. In August 1981, he was arrested and criminally charged with forging accreditation documents to get access to the archives. Despite a broad campaign in his support in the west, in December 1981 Roginskii was sentenced for four years to a camp—a sentence he would serve out in full in Russia's northern regions. Although *Pamiat'* was broken, Roginskii's final speech to the court called for a greater opening of the archives to non-professional researchers, presaging struggles to come.

By the time of his release in August 1985, the Soviet Union had stepped onto a path of renewal. Pushing the limits of Gorbachev's glasnost, Roginskii became one of the founders of the historical enlightenment and human rights organization "Memorial." Born out of a petition calling for the erection of a monument to the victims of political repression, Memorial quickly grew into a decentralized Union-wide organization that at its peak numbered over 200 local branches. Roginskii was one of the co-founders of—and from 1996 onward the head of—Memorial's "scientific-informational center," which encompasses an archive, museum, library, and research units. In addition, from 1998 onwards, Roginskii was elected to head Memorial's board of directors, a post he continued to fill even from his hospital bed in Tel Aviv.

Memorial's relations with Soviet, and subsequently Russian authorities have often been characterized by conflict. The organization only belatedly obtained its official registration in 1990. With the collapse of Communist rule in 1991, Roginskii participated in various commissions in charge of transferring KGB and CPSU archives to Russian state institutions. His work included selecting documents to be used in the 1992 "trial of the Communist Party" before the Constitutional Court. However, this period of collaboration fizzled out as Memorial investigated the state's human rights abuses in Chechnia. In the Putin era, Memorial became a primary target of a law obliging non-governmental organizations engaged in "political activities" and receiving funding from abroad to register as "foreign agents." As Memorial endured repeated and time-consuming "verifications" aimed at intimidating the organization and its supporters in Russia and abroad, Roginskii led the organization as it fought the NGO law in court all the while working to find the resources to continue and expand Memorial's historical, educational, charitable, and advocacy goals.

In the changing winds of the post-Soviet years, Roginskii proved no less able to navigate the official waters than he had been to extract precious sources from the Soviet archives. With a unique combination of unwavering moral convictions and a necessary dose of pragmatism, Roginskii pursued the organization's dual mission of coupling the defense of human rights with the tasks of commemoration, education, and research. For more than two decades, he masterfully preserved Memorial's independence while pursuing opportunities to shape public consciousness about the history of repressions. For instance, while supporting Memorial's work on behalf of present-day political prisoners, Roginskii chose to serve on the jury for the newly unveiled, state-sponsored monument to victims of repression; he reasoned that the importance of official recognition for victims outweighed the unpleasantness of negotiating with representatives of a hypocritical regime. As he passed away at the end of the Russian Revolution's jubilee year, Roginskii left behind an enduring legacy of scholarship, advocacy, and courage.

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