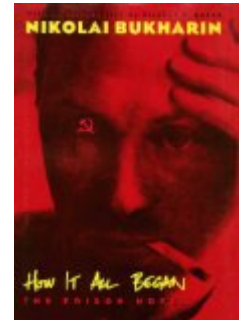


**Nikolai Bukharin.** *How It All Began.* New York/Chichester, West Sussex: Columbia University Press, 1998. xxxi + 345 pp. \$83.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-231-10730-3.



**Reviewed by** David G. Rowley

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On February 27, 1937 Nikolai Bukharin, "golden boy of the revolution" (in Lenin's words), popular Communist leader, and the Soviet Union's most respected Marxist theoretician, was arrested as a "hired murderer, saboteur, and wrecker in the service of fascism." [1] On March 15 of the following year, the Soviet government announced that Bukharin had been executed for his crimes. Bukharin spent the year and sixteen days between his arrest and death in Lubyanka Prison, where he was questioned, threatened, and prepared for what was to be the most spectacular of all Stalin's show trials.

Amazingly, Bukharin found the intellectual energy, under unimaginable mental torment (he knew that his execution was a foregone conclusion and that his wife and child were hostage to his own good behavior), to write four book-length manuscripts: "Socialism and Its Culture," in which he defended the essential humanism of socialism against the threat of fascism; "Philosophical Arabesques," his final interpretation of Marxism; a collection of nearly two hundred poems on history and politics, life and love; and an autobio-

graphical novel. That novel, translated under the title *How It All Began*, was Bukharin's last work. Indeed, it was unfinished, breaking off in mid-sentence.

We are indebted to Stephen Cohen, author of the classic biography of Bukharin, for the discovery of these four manuscripts. At his trial, Bukharin had hinted that he had left some writings behind, but their existence was the subject only of rumor until an aide of Gorbachev told Cohen that such manuscripts did exist and were preserved in a secret archive. Cohen continued to pursue the matter until an associate of Yeltsin's (whose anonymity Cohen preserves) delivered photocopies of the manuscripts to him, to be given to Bukharin's widow, Anna Larina, and son. They have all since been published in Russia. [2]

All Bukharin's prison manuscripts provide fascinating glimpses of Bukharin's analysis and critique of Soviet society, but his novel is remarkable for its profound, implicit rejection of Stalinist culture—in particular for its subversion of the norms of Socialist Realism. Bukharin has often been seen as a leader who could have led the So-

viet Union on a more viable economic and political course; *How It All Began* reveals that he could also have led the Soviet Union on a more creative cultural course.

Curiously (and, of course, unintentionally), the novel is also subversive of the trend in Western historiography that blames Stalinism on the ideological bankruptcy of Bolshevism.

*How It All Began* is part bildungsroman, part lyrical evocation of the Russia of Bukharin's youth. Although purportedly a novel, it is transparently a memoir of Bukharin's own life--beginning with his first consciousness of the world in the early 1890s and ending when Bukharin was still a student in the *gimnaziia* just before the 1905 Revolution.

The most striking aspect of the novel is Bukharin's evocation of the Russia of his youth. His attention to detail, his precise and convincing descriptions of countryside and city, and his deft characterizations of personalities are remarkable. Though elaborate and lush, Bukharin's descriptions are never awkward or overblown; one is struck only by their vividness and freshness. This detail is all the more remarkable when one realizes that this is a first draft--and a hurried one, at that.

As a youth Bukharin was a fervent naturalist, and he conveys the excitement he felt at exploring the countryside in search of new varieties of birds, butterflies, beetles, and amphibians. His nature jaunts provide the opportunity for describing the countryside of central Russia (near Moscow where he spent most of his life) and Bessarabia (where he lived briefly as a boy).

Bukharin is adept, as well, at describing people. He was a close observer of classes of people; he describes and characterizes the behavior of various social ranks, from aristocrats, bureaucrats, merchants, and teachers, down to artisans, laborers, and the denizens of Moscow's lower depths. He delights as well in individual personality studies--including pompous officials in

Bessarabia, good (and bad) teachers in his schools, and a wide variety of relatives and friends of his family--each relationship happy or unhappy in its unique way.

What gives structure to the story are the vicissitudes of his father's career. When Kolya (Bukharin) "Petrov" is born, his father Ivan "Petrov" is employed as a schoolteacher in Moscow. Petty squabbles of the school became unendurable, and Ivan secures a position as tax assessor in Bessarabia. In the city of Kishinev, he works for the department of revenue, collecting taxes, fees, and duties.

However, Ivan's life turns out to be even more miserable in Kishinev than it had been in Moscow. The local officials are hard-drinking, bribe-taking anti-Semites who don't know what to do with Ivan--who is honest and incorruptible and who treats Jews as equals. His colleagues both stood in awe of Ivan and despised him. He is not fired, but another official is sent from St. Petersburg to take over Ivan's work.

Bukharin's father escapes this anomalous situation by taking his family back to Moscow. Teaching positions are hard to come by, and the Petrov children are parceled out among several relatives while their parents live on charity and the sale of their possessions. Kolya and a younger brother live for a time with an uncle who works as a doctor in a village in central Russia. Finally, by the turn of the century, when it is time for Kolya to enter the *gimnaziia*, the whole family gathers back in Moscow--first living with yet another of Kolya's uncles, then, after Ivan finally secures work as a teacher, in their own apartment.

The central character, of course, is Bukharin himself--he is most definitely the hero of his own story. Among many curious and interesting episodes through which Kolya learned what the world is like, we are told of how he first learned about sex and how disillusioned he was with the adult world because his parents had lied to him about it. He tells how he gave up religion, how he

brought a consecrated host away from mass to show his friends it was not miraculous, and how upset his grandmother was by this.

Bukharin tells about how he was introduced to the literature and ideas of the Russian Revolutionary movement from Tosya, a frail but brilliant son of friends of Bukharin's father. We learn of Bukharin's precocious and voracious reading habits, his talent for art, and his stellar performance as a student. Bukharin marvelously recreates the atmosphere of his school. He describes loved and hated teachers. He recalls songs, Latin jokes, and schoolchild pranks. Bukharin's good humor and irrepressible vivacity prevent his pride at his accomplishments and talents from appearing as pure boastfulness. No wonder Lenin called him "the golden boy."

Both Stephen Cohen and translator George Shriver represent this autobiographical novel as carrying a pointed political message. In their respective introductions, they each suggest that Bukharin used "Aesopian language" to attack Stalin and Stalinism. For example, when Bukharin described his father's difficulties as an official in the corrupt Tsarist regime he could easily have been showing the parallels between the Tsarist and the Stalinist bureaucracy. Bukharin's criticism of anti-Semitism could also be applied to Stalin and the party. Bukharin also criticizes the methods of tsarist police interrogation, says that the "best heads" in Russia were cut off, and asserts that the government killed freedom of criticism. He attributes Stalin's famous phrase "There are no fortresses Bolsheviks cannot storm" to a tsarist military officer talking about the old regime. Bukharin portrays Marxists as opposing terrorism (thereby implicitly defending himself from that charge), and he shows the Tsarist government conspiring in the assassination of its own members (a parallel with Stalin's murder of Kirov?).

It is for these reasons that Cohen chose to title this book *How It All Began* instead of *Times* (which is the literal translation of *Vremena*, the ti-

tle that Bukharin, himself, chose for his novel). This implies that the book is "about" the beginning of Bukharin's involvement in the revolutionary movement. Cohen gave it this title precisely because he believes that Bukharin intended the novel to have "a political edge" (p. xviii).

I disagree. I believe that such a reading of Bukharin's intentions conceals a far more important message. The most significant aspect of this memoir is Bukharin's own life and feelings, not his connection to the revolutionary movement.

The political edge to this novel is primarily present in four very problematic chapters that he might have been expected to have edited out of later drafts. In Chapter Twelve Bukharin briefly summarizes the social, cultural, and political status of Russia at the turn of the century. Chapter Eighteen is a fictionalized meeting (with dialogue) between Nicholas II and Wilhelm II in which Wilhelm urges Nicholas to strengthen the Russian military presence in Asia. Chapter Twenty describes a debate among Socialist-Revolutionaries and Social Democrats (featuring not Bukharin, himself, but his cousin) which brings out all the differences regarding terrorism, the role of the peasantry, and principles of party organization that divided the SDs and SRs. Chapter Twenty-One recounts a conversation between a liberal government official and the reactionary Minister of the Interior Plehve. Bukharin portrays Plehve as a hypocrite who pretends to be a reformer while implementing reactionary policies. Bukharin also shows the ties between the police and the terrorists and particularly the government's role in allowing the assassination of its own officials.

These four chapters are exceptional for two reasons. First, they are neither about Bukharin's growing up nor are they about his observations of the world; they are not written from Kolya's point of view. Because they are descriptions of events that Bukharin could only have known about indirectly, they lack the immediacy and vividness of the memoir. Second, they are the only overtly po-

litical passages. "Aesopian" references to anti-semitism and bureaucratic arrogance in the memoiristic chapters need not be taken as Aesopian at all. They are there because they fit naturally into the narrative of his memoir--because they were significant to understanding Kolya's life and consciousness. This cannot be said of the four non-memoir chapters.

To treat this novel as a polemical attack on Stalin and Stalinism is vastly to underrate and diminish it. I believe that *How It All Began* is a far more subversive work than a mere attack on the politics of Stalinism. It is, in its very essence and by its example, a rejection of the entire tone of Soviet culture in the 1930s. Bukharin disdains to strike the conventional pose of the veteran revolutionary; he shows sympathy for Russia's poor, but he never expresses trite and expected hatred of capitalism and Tsarism nor childish vows to fight against oppression. Moreover, there is no hint of Socialist Realism in this work; it is profoundly personal and humanistic, dealing, as it does, with the thoughts and feelings of a unique individual. The very non-political nature of the memoiristic chapters of *How It All Began* makes it a far stronger political statement than any of the merely polemical thrusts at Stalin.

In its Russian context, Bukharin's memoir will, I suspect, be considered to be his greatest work and his lasting legacy to Russian letters. Bukharin's theoretical and political work is unlikely to be much read in the future. His Marxist theorizing does not address contemporary issues. As the Soviet Union recedes into history, Bukharin's role as a one-time leader of a revolutionary regime will diminish in significance. It is as a contributor to Russian belles-lettres--though minor, indeed, compared with the Russian Masters--that I believe Bukharin's name will live on.

In its Western context, Bukharin's memoir is also significant. *How It All Began* carries a subversive message for Western understanding of Soviet history. The show trials and the executions of

Lenin's generation of Bolsheviks are one of the most spectacular, horrifying, and intriguing of all the perversions of the Stalin era. Some observers have found in this bizarre set of events a symbol of the entire totalitarian system; it has been interpreted as not only the work of Stalin's evil genius, but also the logical product of attempting to rebuild the world in the image of an ideal.

Indeed, Arthur Koestler used the example of Bukharin's arrest, trial, and execution to make just that point. In his classic *Darkness at Noon*, Koestler imagines Bukharin as an ideologue who willingly goes to his death partly in suicide because he realizes that the ideology he believed in had produced a wasteland and partly as his last, inescapable gift to that ideology. Bukharin's prison manuscripts prove Koestler wrong. *Socialism and Its Culture* and *Philosophical Arabesques* are not disillusioned recantations of his intellectual past, but logical continuations of his interest in the cultural problems of Soviet society, his alarm at the danger of German Fascism, and his desire to keep Soviet philosophy firmly on Marxist footings.

The same is true of *How It All Began*. In August 1934, at a meeting of the First Congress of Soviet Writers, Bukharin had denounced ideologically strait-jacketed art and called for "humanism," "powerful, rich, and variegated art" that would express "the entire world of emotions--love, happiness, fear, anguish, anger, and so on to infinity--the entire world of desire and passion." He even praised the lyric poetry of Boris Pasternak. [3] In its relentless refusal to conform to the standards of Socialist Realism, in its profound and non-political humanism, *How It All Began* exemplifies what Bukharin meant in his address.

*How It All Began* does give us an insight into the psychology of at least one Old Bolshevik, but it is not at all what Koestler imagined. It seems to me that Bukharin's last writings tell us that the people who made October, who won the Civil War, and who attempted to build Socialism with-

out coercion in the 1920s were not ideologically bankrupt moral monsters. Bukharin was a humane and sensitive human being. His complicity in a political system that resulted in the deaths of millions is no different from the complicity of many politicians whom the West admires in sending millions off to die in "good" wars. In our utilitarian age, sacrificing lives has never been controversial—only the purposes for which they have been sacrificed. To see the Old Bolsheviks as ideologues relentlessly driven to destruction by the bankruptcy of their own ideas is put to rest by this novel. It was an evil man who put Bukharin to death and not an evil ideology.

In the face of imminent and certain death, Bukharin wrote a novel in which he re-lived his joy-filled youth. *How It All Began* is notable not for its incidental barbs directed at Stalin but for its underlying optimism, its spirit of wonder at the beauty of the world, and its sense that life is a great adventure.

#### Notes

[1]. Stephen F. Cohen, *Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution: A Political Biography, 1888-1938* (New York: Vintage Books, 1975), p. 370.

[2]. The novel appeared in 1994: Nikolai Bukharin, *Vremena* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1994). The other works, *Sotsializm I ego kul'tura*, *Filosofskie arabeski*, and *Tiuremnye stikhi* were published two years later in *Nikolai Bukharin*, *Tiuremnye rukopisi N. I. Bukharina v 2-knigakh*, ed. G. A. Bordiugov (Moscow: AIRO-XX, 1996).

[3]. *How It All Began*, p. xxvi

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