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AVON HILLS SALON

Thoughts from the Avon Hills

Nick Hayes on Stephen F. Cohen

SEPTEMBER 22, 2020

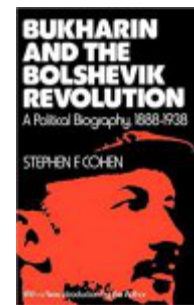


Stephen F. Cohen
(November 25, 1938 –
September 18, 2020)

In the fall of 1978, a young, unknown historian made a cold call from his office at the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) to Stephen F. Cohen, a professor of Politics and Russian Studies at Princeton University. At the time, Cohen was arguably the most influential and well-known scholar in the field of Soviet Studies. The young historian was undoubtedly the least known scholar in the field. I was the young historian. As I stumbled over a sentence or two of my clumsy introduction, Cohen interrupted me. He had read an article that I had just published. He lavished praise on my recent article, asked to read other examples of my work, and accepted my invitation to come to my university (UTEP) as a visiting scholar. My telephone call was the start of a friendship that lasted over decades until last Thursday,

September 18, when [Cohen died](#) of lung cancer.

The story of great scholars always starts with a book. In 1973, Cohen had published “Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution: A Political Biography 1888 – 1938.” Critics and reviewers called Cohen’s biography of the Bolshevik Nikolai Bukharin “revisionist.” It was an



understatement. Cohen's study of Bukharin represented a complete re-thinking of the Russian revolution, its aftermath and the potential for meaningful reform within the Soviet Union and its post-Soviet successor, Russia. Cohen went on to publish nine more books that analyzed the struggle for reform in Russia, critiqued the field of "Sovietology" in American academic life, and placed the blame for the tensions in U.S./Russian relations on Washington, not Moscow.

His books sold. He packed the house when he spoke at scholarly conferences. He counted among his friends two presidents – George H. W. Bush and Mikhail Gorbachev. He was a consummate public intellectual as an editor and contributor to "The Nation," a consultant to CBS News, and the Founding Director of the American Committee on East-West Accord.

In our latter years, we often joked that we had reached that age when men write memoirs. In my last conversations with Cohen, we discussed plans for conference on the memoirs of our generation in Russian Studies and Sovietology. He told me that due to health problems he would have to withdraw from the project.

A decade ago, I published an interview and profile of Cohen's life and career. For more information on Cohen's legacy and influence, visit the interview at this [link](#).



Nick Hayes is a Professor of History and holds the University Chair in Critical Thinking at the College of St. Benedict/Saint John's University in Minnesota. His second memoir – Looking for Leningrad: Memories of my Soviet Life will be published this spring by Nodin Press.

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