A Review of Victor Serge, Memoirs of a Revolutionary

It was in Dwight Macdonald’s journal Politics in 1944–5 that the only extracts from these memoirs published in Victor Serge’s lifetime appeared. The honour that is due to Macdonald’s nonconformity in that period may be measured by the fact that the editor of one Mexican journal which was publishing Serge in the same period was summoned before the Minister of the Interior (later President) Alemán, to have passed on the request not only of the Soviet but also of the British ambassador that Serge be excluded from publication.

Whose was this voice that had to be silenced? A voice in which the unpalatable truth about the Russian Revolution was told: unpalatable in 1944 to the Western myth-makers about Stalin; unpalatable to both Stalinists and neo-Trotskyists for his testimony about the dictatorship, not of proletariat, but of the bureaucrats from 1919 onward; unpalatable to all dogmatic anti-Bolsheviks for his refusal to admit the inevitability of the Revolution’s degeneration:

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It is often said that ‘the germ of Stalinism’ was in Bolshevism at its beginning. Well I have no objection. Only Bolshevism contained many other germs – a mass of other germs – and those who lived through the enthusiasm of the first years of the first victorious revolution ought not to forget it.²

Victor Serge was, in adolescence, an anarchist in Belgium and France; in adult life, a revolutionary in both Barcelona and Leningrad; a leading official of the Third International and a leading organiser of the Left Opposition; and an exile in France and Mexico pursued by the GPU. His life is as much a microcosm of revolutionary activity as Trotsky’s was, but it is complementary to Trotsky’s. Trotsky, at every stage, had problems of organisation in the forefront of his mind; Serge, at every stage, had problems of people. In the critical years of the Russian Revolution, Serge as an anarchist adherent to Bolshevism was trusted both by those Bolsheviks who had libertarian doubts and by those anarchists who remained outside Bolshevism. He is thus able to give a more complete portrait of many Communists than they themselves ever dared to reveal in public, among them Lukács and Gramsci.³ It is because he brings it brings political insight to bear in drawing this fine series of private faces that he is such a fine analysts of the human substance of the revolution.

This does not make him any less tough-minded. He supported the party during the repression of the libertarian revolutionaries at Kronstadt: there was no alternative to the Party. But he never concealed his hatred of the Cheka. And he had no illusions about the cardboard character of the Third International. What is more, these were not attitudes constructed after the event: unlike so many others, Serge never had to do violence to his own memories, never had to suppress or distort. The result is a document on a level with N. Sukhanov’s personal record of the Revolution, Trotsky’s History and Alfred Rosmer’s account of the Third International under Lenin. Indeed, the four comprise the essential library of the Revolution.⁴

The most original and perhaps most exciting section of Serge’s memoirs is that concerning the history of the Left Opposition in the Soviet Union. All three issues on which the Opposition fought, party democracy, agriculture and China, have remained relevant. Indeed, the Chinese Communist Party

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² Serge 1939, p. 54.