

Victor Serge and the Russian Revolution

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What Can Anarchists Learn From His Revolutionary Life?

Victor Serge is admired for his writings and his life, including his participation in the Russian Revolution and its aftermath. He went from anarchism to Bolshevism to Trotskyism and then broke from Trotsky. Trotskyists often cite him against anarchism. 90 years after the Russian Revolution, it is worth asking, what, if anything, can anarchists learn from him?

In her posthumous book, Susan Sontag (2007) has an essay, “Unextinguished: The Case of Victor Serge.” She is one of many who have admired Serge’s work and life, such as George Orwell. Peter Sedgewick (of the British Socialist Workers Party) called Serge “one of the most outstanding socialist authors who has ever lived” (1997; p. 183). Evolving from anarchism to Bolshevism to Trotskyism, Serge has been called an “anarcho-Bolshevik” (Weissman, 1997) and a “libertarian Leninist” (Spencer, 1997) — with some reason. He has also been called “the Bolsheviks’ pet anarchist” (Sreenan, 1998) — also with reason. Author of some 30 books, he was not a great theoretician, but he was an important historian, novelist, and poet, and always a revolutionary activist.

Some read his autobiography or his novels to get a sense of what it was like to live through revolutionary upheavals. Others enjoy the humane art of his works. But various Trotskyists have two main uses for him. One is to use his life to demonstrate that it is possible to have the libertarian, democratic, and humanist values of anarchism...without being an anarchist — in fact, by being a Leninist. The other is to use him to defend the policies of Lenin and Trotsky against the criticisms of the anarchists. I don’t know how many times I have read Trotskyist literature quoting Serge about how there were undoubtedly authoritarian “germs” or “seeds” within Bolshevism which developed into Stalinism, but that there were other, better, potentialities which might have won out under different objective circumstances. No doubt, the worst in Leninism was brought out by Russia’s poverty, backwardness, peasant majority, civil wars and foreign invasions — and the failure of the revolution to spread to the industrialized nations of Europe. But such a statement simultaneously admits that there were authoritarian tendencies in Leninism while excusing its development into totalitarianism, because of supposedly uncontrollable objective conditions.

As I will argue, there are problems with these usages of Serge. For one thing, he was much more critical of the actions of Lenin and Trotsky than most Trotskyists are willing to accept. For another, when he did defend their worst actions, he exposed a streak of his own authoritarianism. Also, at the end of his life, he moved away from a revolutionary libertarian socialism toward a more “moderate” political position.

Victor Lvovich Kibalchich (pen name Serge) was born in Belgium in 1890 of two Russian political émigrés (Weissman, 2001). As a young man he went to France, where he published an individualist-anarchist paper. For sympathy to the anarchist Bonnot gang (which had committed robberies and had shoot-outs with the police), he was sent to prison for five years in solitary confinement. Over time he was to suffer more than ten years of prison in several countries, besides persecution in the Soviet Union. When he was out, he went to Spain where he participated with the anarcho-syndicalists in the failed 1917 revolution. He came to reject anarchism because, he felt, it did not take seriously the need to take power. In 1919, he went to Russia and joined the Bolshevik Party (now the Communists). He participated in the defense of Petrograd from the White counterrevolutionary army. He served in various capacities on the staff of the Com-

munist International, in Russia, Germany, and Austria. Eventually, he joined the Trotskyist Left Opposition.

In 1933 he was arrested by the Stalinist state as an oppositionist and sent into internal exile. An international outcry, especially by French intellectuals (André Gide, Romain Rolland, André Malraux, etc.), persuaded Stalin to let him go to France in 1936 — just before the Moscow Purge Trials. A little later and he would have been killed. He joined the Trotskyist international organization (later to become the “Fourth International”), only to break with Trotsky by 1937. He gave support to one of the parties in the Spanish revolution during the thirties. After the 1940 German occupation of France, he fled to the south of France, and barely managed to escape with the help of Dwight and Nancy Macdonald from the U.S. He could only get to Mexico, by 1941. There he died in 1947, poverty stricken, of a heart attack, at 57.

Criticisms of the Bolsheviks

Unlike the Trotskyists, Serge severely criticized some of Lenin’s policies. He declared that as early as the first year of Bolshevik power, they made a terrible mistake in permitting the political police (the Cheka) the power to arrest, try, and execute people — through secret hearings instead of public tribunals. He wrote that the revolution died a “self-inflicted death in 1918 with the establishment of the Cheka” (quoted in Weissman, 2001; p. 7). This set the stage for uncontrolled arrests, torture, and mass murder by the Cheka, as well as frame-ups (first of the Mensheviks in order to outlaw them, and later of internal party oppositions). As he saw it, this began the degeneration of the regime.

He also criticized the formation of a one-party state instead of legalization of those socialist parties which would obey the soviet system. He advocated formation of a post-civil war coalition government. Similarly, he criticized the Left Opposition for not making legalization of soviet parties a demand in its program. (Under Serge’s influence, Trotsky added it to his program, much later, in the middle thirties). He condemned the outlawry and arrests of anarchists and the betrayal and destruction of Makhno’s anarchist-led forces in Ukraine.

In 1921, sailors rebelled at the Kronstadt naval base. As a Leninist, Serge did not deny the right of the Communists to suppress the rebellion. Yet he denounced the way the Leninists handled the rebellion, believing that they might have prevented the armed conflict. He pointed out that the Communists refused to negotiate with the sailors. The authorities rejected the offer of mediation by the U.S. anarchists Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman. They lied about the rebels in the Communist press. After the naval base was conquered, the captured sailors were shot in batches, in a terrible massacre of prisoners. “Out of inhumanity, a needless crime had just been committed against the proletariat and the peasants” (Serge, in Lenin & Trotsky, 1979; p. 137). Serge considered resigning from the party.

During the civil war (which was also a war against multiple foreign invasions), the Communists had developed a highly centralized, state-run, economy, called War Communism. At the end of the war, they turned to a revival of private markets (the New Economic Policy or N.E.P.). Serge believed that these were not the only alternatives. Instead, a regime committed to worker’s management, he felt, could have achieved recovery by encouraging worker-run cooperatives to take over branches of the economy, creating a “communism of associations.” Even for use in markets, the idea of worker-run cooperatives never seems to have occurred to the Communists.

His Authoritarian Defense of Leninism

Yet Serge defended the Bolshevik dictatorship. During the early years, he praised the system and kept his misgivings from foreign anarchists whom he tried to win for Leninism. Nor did he join the early oppositions within the Party: the Left Communists, the Workers' Opposition, or the Democratic Centralists. Despite what he saw as its "errors," he felt that there was no alternative to the leadership.

Through four years of civil war, he said, tens of thousands of militant workers had died or, at best, risen into positions of power, no longer being workers. Serge argued that there was nothing left among the overworked, starving, masses outside the party which could have been appealed to. "In 1920–21, all that was energetic, militant, ever-so-little socialistic in the labor population...had already been drained by the Communist Party...In 1921, everyone who aspires to socialism is inside the party; what remains outside isn't worth much for the social transformation" (Serge, in Lenin & Trotsky, 1979; pp. 138–9). Given the chance, argued Serge, the starving, war-weary, workers and peasants would have voted against the Communists, for moderate or right wing socialist parties (maybe anarchists). These, he believed, would have capitulated to the capitalists, landlords, and foreign imperialists.

In other words, Serge admitted that the party was ruling without the support of the working class and certainly without that of the vast peasant majority. By what right did it rule (besides wanting to)? Apparently because it knew what was right, having the "science" of Marxism. There is nothing of democracy in this. The popular soviet/council democracy of the 1917 revolution was good for getting into power but not to be relied on afterwards. Apparently it was not to be thought of that the party, having lost the confidence of the workers and peasants, should let itself be voted out of office.

He wrote, "If the Bolshevik dictatorship fell, it was only a short step to chaos, and through chaos to a peasant uprising, the massacre of the Communists, the return of the émigrés, and, in the end, through the sheer force of events, another dictatorship, this time anti-proletarian" (quoted in Weissman, 2001; p. 46). In fact, the "Bolshevik dictatorship" did fall (at least in the limited sense of ending the rule of individuals who subjectively believed in working class socialism). There developed a counterrevolutionary, cynical, "anti-proletarian dictatorship" (the Stalinist, state-capitalist, bureaucracy). This dictatorship did "massacre the Communists" through the Great Purges, wiping out tens of thousands of Communists and other socialists who had any memory of the workers' revolution (even Communists who had been Stalin's supporters). It also murdered many millions of workers and peasants. This did not develop through the bad result of democratic soviet elections but exactly through the supposed "proletarian dictatorship" of the Communists — that is, through the methods which Serge excused.

It is not clear that the reactionary effects which Serge feared from free soviet elections would have necessarily happened. He himself suggested an alternative, namely a coalition government of the Communists with those left parties which had been on their side in the civil war, such as the Left Mensheviks and Left Social Revolutionaries, with support by the anarchists. But in the long run, as Lenin and Trotsky had said from the beginning, no workers' rule could last without an international revolution. So Serge's predictions might have eventually come true. But at least...at least...the counterrevolutionary, anti-proletarian, dictatorship would not have been able to cover itself with the banner of revolutionary communism and to drag that banner in the mud!

Lenin and Trotsky were not Stalin. In coalition with peasant populists and anarchists, they made the October Russian Revolution as the culmination of a vast, democratic, popular upheaval. They certainly had not intended to create a totalitarian state (unlike Hitler, who knew exactly what he was doing). At the end of his life, Lenin was appalled by the bureaucratic nature of the state. He tried to ally with Trotsky to depose Stalin. Trotsky fought for years for a workers' revolution to overthrow the Stalinist bureaucracy. He was murdered by an agent of Stalin. Yet they shared some basic assumptions with Stalin about what socialism was, namely a centralized, statified, economy, in which workers' democracy was secondary at best. They never understood how they had contributed to the creation of a state capitalist monstrosity. Although Trotsky declared that the Soviet Union had a state form similar to that of Nazi Germany, to the end of his life he regarded it as a "workers' state," because industry was nationalized.

Serge Moves Right

After being in Western Europe for a year, Serge broke with Trotsky (Weissman, 2001). There were several issues. Serge correctly rejected Trotsky's belief that Stalin's regime was a "degenerated workers' state," to be defended from capitalist states. (Serge developed an unclear position which approximated a "bureaucratic collectivist," neither-capitalist-nor-socialist, theory.) He rejected Trotsky's attempt to pull together a new international by the sheer force of Trotsky's will. Serge wanted the Trotskyists to work together with the anarchists in the Spanish revolution. There was also a personal conflict in which Trotsky wrote vicious and almost hysterical attacks on Serge on the basis of misinformation. "A scathing article by Trotsky...was totally unjustified and unjust" (Desolre, 1997; p 197).

But there was another side. Serge advocated working inside the Popular Fronts of France and Spain and he gave full political support to the Spanish POUM (Workers' Party of Marxist Unification). It had joined the capitalist government in the Spanish region of Catalonia. On these topics Serge was wrong and Trotsky correct. (Also wrong were the Spanish anarchist leaders who joined the Popular Front governments in Catalonia and Spain.) By coalitions with bourgeois parties, workers' parties tie their own hands, becoming unable to go beyond the capitalist program of their ally. It meant giving up the socialist revolution. Meanwhile the capitalist party is given political protection on its left. This is unlike an alliance of socialist or workers' parties only, the United Front, without a bourgeois partner. (The Spanish anarchist Friends of Durruti Group denounced the anarchist leaders for joining the capitalist governments.)

When the Cold War began, Serge struggled to come to grips with new realities. His writings focused on the evils of Stalinism and said little about Western imperialism. For example, he did not support the national independence struggles of Vietnam or even India, out of fear of the spread of Stalinism. Dwight Macdonald criticized Serge for writing for the right-social democratic journal, *The New Leader*, while Serge criticized Macdonald for supporting the Greek anti-British guerrillas, since they had a Communist leadership. At the very end of his life, he wrote a letter to André Malraux, then a minister in the French government, saying that if Serge were in France, he would urge his fellow socialists to support the Gaullist government. (At best this was a dishonest attempt to butter up Malraux in hopes of getting permission to return to France.) The Trotskyist Alan Wald summarizes Serge's writings in this period, "Although formally a supporter of Lenin

and a defender of the legacy of the October 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, Serge's practical politics in the 1940s wobbled between left- and right-wing social democracy" (1992; p. 47).

During the Cold War, most radicals were disoriented by the lack of working class rebellions in Europe and North America. Almost all leftists turned either toward the Soviet Union (as did the orthodox Trotskyists) or toward the Western democracies — that is, U.S. imperialism. That was the path of the New York anti-Stalinist intellectuals, some of whom became moderate social democrats and a few eventually became rabid neoconservatives (Wald, 1987). Very few radicals continued to reject both sides (what was sometimes called a "Third Camp" position).

Serge continued to declare his revolutionary socialism and his identification with the Russian Revolution. He never abandoned this. Would he have succumbed to pro-capitalism in the end? Susan Sontag (2001) speculates that if Serge had lived for another decade or so, he would "probably" have realized (as she came to believe) that the revolution was not so much betrayed but was "a catastrophe for the Russian people from the beginning" (p. 63) and that all revolutions are bad. Wald (1992) asks, "Would Serge have become one of these apostates? There is no certain answer" (p. 51). He notes that some of the radicals who turned right during the beginning of the Cold War, turned left again in the sixties, such as Serge's friend Dwight Macdonald. The truth is, we cannot know how his thinking would have developed. We can only judge his life as a whole.

The Life of Victor Serge

What are we to make of such a person as Victor Serge? He was contradictory and often wrong. His criticisms of the anarchists (their failure to take seriously the issue of power) was correct, but his joining the Communists was a cure worse than the disease. From the beginning he recognized many of the evils of Leninism in practice, but he never rejected Leninism. He defended the Russian Revolution but did not see that it had been betrayed by Lenin and Trotsky, before Stalin. The Trotskyists seek to use him to refute anarchism, but this is not very effective.

Serge tried to live up to the libertarian ideals which he had learned as an anarchist, to the best he was able. He never sold out for wealth or political power. He wrote a magnificent autobiography and set of novels, which bring alive what it meant to participate in revolutionary and counterrevolutionary times. Living and dying in poverty, he was no saint or hero, nor was he a pro-capitalist traitor ("apostate"). Politically I do not find him a model, since I prefer people who went from Trotskyism to anarchism, such as Daniel Guerin — but as a person, I admire him very much.

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