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Victor Serge: Political, Social & Literary Critic of
the USSR, 1919-1947; The Reflections and
Activities of a Belgo-Russian Revolutionary
Caught In the Orbit of Soviet Political History

Susan Claudia Weissman

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Abstract

Victor Serge: Political, Social & Literary Critic of the USSR, 1919-1947; The Reflections and Activities of a Belgo-Russian Revolutionary Caught In the Orbit of Soviet Political History

Victor Serge is known primarily as a revolutionary novelist, yet his work has received little scholarly literary attention. Two doctoral dissertations have explored Serge's literary expression in the last twenty-five years. This study is the first examination of Serge's historical and political-economic writings on the Soviet Union, based on his published and unpublished writings.

Victor Serge is a unique political figure who utilized various literary forms to express his view of the nature of the social-political-economic system established during Stalin's rule. Pamphleteer, historian, poet, novelist, biographer, memoirist and journalist, Serge was at once Russian, Belgian, French and Spanish; he was anarchist, syndicalist, Bolshevik, Left Oppositionist, prisoner and refugee. Serge's experiences in the Soviet Union and international communist movement form the basis of his political and literary writings. Serge was a committed writer with a novelist's eye for detail and penetrating description.

The dissertation begins with Serge's arrival in his never seen homeland. Born Victor Lvovich Kibalchich in Belgian exile to Russian narodniki parents, Serge was drawn to the land of the first socialist revolution, the country of his roots and his language. He arrived as an anarcho-bolshevik with two prison terms and a failed insurrection behind him. In the next twenty years, Serge participated in the Bolshevik party, the Comintern, and the Left Opposition. He was sent to Germany on Comintern assignment, where he participated in the aborted revolution of October 1923, and edited the French language edition of Inprecor. He was a rank-and-file militant of the Leningrad Left

Opposition, though on intimate terms with its leaders. Like most of the 'revolutionary generation of Bolsheviks,' he endured imprisonment and deportation. Unlike them, Serge was saved from certain death through an international campaign of pressure for his release. Though Serge was expelled from the USSR in 1936, he did not end his association with it: he spent the remainder of his life contemplating and acting upon his experience in the disfigured revolution.

This thesis investigates Serge's critique of the Soviet Union through his life and works. We follow his political associations and relations, record his analysis and draw out his insights. Serge's mature reflections on the Soviet Union and the world are seen through a comprehensive study of his experiences and writings from the twenties and thirties in the Soviet Union and in European exile. The aim of this work is to establish Victor Serge as a contemporary thinker, a man whose life spans the tumultuous struggles of the first half of the twentieth century, while his ideas speak to the problems humanity faces on the eve of the twenty-first. His largely unpublished or out of print work addresses the key theoretical problems of Soviet society as well as the impact that society has had on the world struggle for socialism. Victor Serge considered the Soviet system under Stalin an anti-human, totalitarian bureaucratic society with collectivist tendencies, that was neither socialist nor capitalist. It could only establish itself through a bloody counter-revolution which killed millions while retaining the language of socialism. The new system was inherently unstable and in permanent conflict with its own people. It is this legacy that the Soviet Union today is attempting to reform. Serge's analysis is at times uneven, though his thinking is fresh, and scrupulously honest. Serge is seen as the historian of the Left Opposition, an instinctive, unorthodox and non-sectarian Marxist who retained his dignity and optimism for a socialist future, through the darkest decades of defeats.

Introduction

Soviet political history is filled with dark pages and 'blank spots.' The rich and hotly contested development theories debated in the 1920's in the Soviet Union, accompanied by divisions within the CPSU(B) have been suppressed, just as all their leaders and supporters were repressed in the brutal purges of the 1930s. Both decades of Soviet history were literally written off in the USSR. Gorbachev implicitly recognized that in order to reform the Soviet present, there was a need for an understanding of social reality, which necessitated a rediscovery of the past. Within this context, and in order to discredit the heirs of Stalin in the Soviet regime, Gorbachev unleashed glasnost and called for a probe into the "blank spots" in Soviet history. This study concerns one of those blank spots -- the life and work of Victor Serge, dissident and oppositionist from 1923 until his expulsion from the gulag in 1936.

Victor Serge lived from 1890 to 1947. He was politically active in seven countries, participated in three revolutions, spent more than ten years in captivity, published more than thirty books and left behind thousands of pages of unpublished manuscripts, correspondence and articles. He was born into one political exile and died in another, and spent his life as a sort of permanent political oppositionist: he opposed capitalism first as an anarchist, and then as a Bolshevik; he opposed certain Bolshevik practices with his libertarian leanings; he opposed Stalin as a Left Oppositionist; he opposed Trotsky as an anti-Stalinist non-sectarian; and finally he opposed fascism and capitalism's Cold War as an unrepentant revolutionary Marxist.

Victor Serge's life experience and revolutionary writings are an eloquent challenge to orthodox notions of the Soviet Union. His refusal to succumb to either the capitalist West or the Soviet state assured his marginality and consigned him to a

life of persecution and poverty. Serge's life and works amount to a corrective to Stalinism, and an alternative to Bukharinism -- in both Serge's lifetime, and its contemporary incarnation in Gorbachev's 'perestroika.' His works are a valuable, neglected addition to the existing literature which shed light on the formative chapters in Soviet political history. Serge wrote as an insider with a particular point of view: a Left Oppositionist with an anarchist past. His experience led him not to renounce socialism, but to bring to it a declaration of the rights of man, enriching socialist goals. He opposed the one party system, declaring as early as 1918 and again in 1923 that a coalition government, although fraught with dangers, would have been less dangerous than Stalin's dictatorship of the secretariat and the secret police. Serge criticized the NEP for bringing back inequality and misery, while not revitalizing democracy and a multi-party system. Serge's proposals for economic reform included 'workers democracy' and a 'communism of associations' instead of rigid, top-down, anti-democratic 'plans'. Serge not only analyzed the political development of the Soviet Union; he evoked the atmosphere of the twenties and thirties inside the USSR and the Communist movement; a testimony to his literary achievement, his political acumen, and his unflagging honesty. His writings are passionate, honest and sometimes poetic; above all they are critical and retain the ideas of the revolutionary generation of Bolsheviks. Serge's works merit a fresh examination, both in the West and in the Soviet Union. The present work aims in that direction.

Victor Serge, a Belgian born Russian, did not get to his homeland until January 1919, at the age of 28. This dissertation begins with his political odyssey in the USSR. Serge arrived as a seasoned revolutionary anarchist who had served two prison terms and fought in a failed revolution (in Spain). He quickly joined the Bolsheviks (May 1919) and worked on the first administrative staff of the Executive Committee of the Communist International, participating in its first three

Congresses. He fought in the Civil War (seige of Leningrad), was Commissar in charge of the archives of the former Secret Police (Okhrana), and mixed freely in Bolshevik, anarchist, and literary circles in both Leningrad and Moscow. Serge was sent on Comintern assignment to Germany to help in the preparation of the German revolution of 1923. In Berlin Serge edited the French edition of Inprecorr, the main journal of the Comintern. Upon the defeat of the German October, Serge moved to Vienna, where he continued Comintern work until 1925, when he demanded to return to the Soviet Union to take his stand with the Left Opposition.

Once back in the USSR, Serge continued to mingle in richly varied political, social and literary milieux, earning his living as a translator of the works of Lenin, Zinoviev, Trotsky and others. He was an open political activist in the Left Opposition and one of the main spokespersons in the Leningrad Party Organization for the Opposition. Serge was expelled from the Party just after the 15th Party Congress in December 1927. Three months later he was arrested and held for eight weeks. Upon his release Serge nearly died of an intestinal occlusion.

This brush with death was a turning point for Serge, who now traded political activism for the pen and began to write in profusion "about these unforgettable times." In the next five years of precarious liberty in the USSR, Serge wrote and published abroad five books, including three novels and his monumental history Year One of the Russian Revolution. Not one line of his works was published in the USSR until 1989.

Rearrested in 1933, Serge was deported to Orenburg in Kazakhstan, where for three years he and his son nearly starved to death. There Serge wrote another four books, all of which were confiscated by the GPU when he was expelled from the country in April 1936. His release was the result of an international campaign of pressure by prominent French intellectuals. Serge barely escaped with his life, just four short months before the first Moscow trial and the "Great

Purges."

Once Serge was in the West, Stalin stripped him of his nationality and passport. European Communists slandered him, and Moscow used all its influence to prevent him from publishing in the mainstream press. Nevertheless, Serge began to "unravel the labyrinth of madness," The Great Purge, and to analyze the nature of the social organism emerging in the USSR. This became his life's work. Despite enormous personal and economic hardship -- his wife was driven insane by the relentless persecutions -- Serge engaged in a daily struggle to feed himself and his family while writing to expose what he saw as Stalin's betrayal of everything socialist. Serge remained in Paris until the Wehrmacht arrived in June 1940. Fleeing with his family on foot, Serge spent a frantic year in Marseilles waiting for a visa out of Vichy France, hounded by the Gestapo and the Stalinist NKVD. In frightful danger, Serge channelled all his efforts into writing. He was finally admitted to Mexico, where he spent the remainder of his life, writing "only for the drawer" in the face of an almost total publishers' boycott of his work. Serge, his head brimming with projects, died in poverty in November 1947. He had spent more than ten years of his life in various forms of captivity, and had been physically hungry almost all his life. His works include more than thirty books and pamphlets of history and politics; seven spectacular novels, two volumes of poetry, three novellas and a collection of short stories; hundreds of articles and essays, biographies of Lenin, Stalin and Trotsky, a diary, his own memoirs, and translations of the works of Lenin, Trotsky, Zinoviev, Figner, Gladkov, Mayakovsky and various others. One of his books was published under Panait Istrati's name, and he was the ghostwriter for Alexander Barmine's Memoir. It is a prodigious published record, which has been misinterpreted and, worse, largely ignored. Beyond the published works Serge left an enormous archive of correspondence, unpublished essays on politics, history, philosophy, literary criticism and polemics.

This study analyzes Serge's work while describing his life. It sifts through Serge's enormous written record in order to present his views and trace the evolution of his thought through his political activity. The dissertation is both an intellectual history, and political and analytical biography of this important but poorly understood figure. The thesis brings to light many of Serge's hitherto unknown writings, concentrating on his historical and political-economic work (he is primarily known as a revolutionary novelist). It aims to establish Serge as a contemporary thinker, a man whose life experience spans important struggles of the first half of the twentieth century, yet whose ideas address dilemmas that still confront the world on the eve of the twenty-first century. Serge's contribution is of increasing relevance not only in the West but also in the Soviet Union where glasnost has allowed excavation to begin of the buried Soviet past. Serge's work is virtually unknown in the Soviet Union, although the literary journal Ural recently serialized The Case of Comrade Tulayev.¹ In the West his Memoirs of a Revolutionary is often cited in footnotes, yet his books are largely out of print. As scholars East and West probe into that formative period of Soviet history when its class relations were formed, Serge's works, in various literary forms, go to the very heart of the issues raised.

Serge was a witness to and participant in the Soviet revolutionary experience. As an insider, he knew the men and women who made the revolution and those who destroyed it. He wrote about them in his political works and made them characters in his novels. Serge was not a dispassionate objective reporter, but an ardent Left Oppositionist whose political outlook framed his exposition. Nor was he simply a memoirist, but a partisan writer who paid scholarly attention to the material at hand. He wrote with a novelist's eye for penetrating

¹Unfortunately, it is almost impossible to find Ural in Moscow or Leningrad.

detail, posing essential questions, pointing out contradictions, although he often left them unresolved.

Serge's works address the key theoretical problems of Soviet society. His writings both correct the record of a falsified history and attempt an analysis of the essential nature of the Soviet system. Further, Serge could capture an idea or reveal an event in prose that exposes the political, economic, and especially, social consequences of the emerging Stalinist system.

This examination of Serge's critique develops chronologically but simultaneously examines several themes: Serge as political participant; Serge as descriptive political analyst of the USSR; Serge as historian of Soviet Union; Serge as novelist of the revolution and its subsequent development. Much of Serge's work has been neglected in Soviet Studies. He has been maligned by one-time collaborators. (His uneasy relationship with Trotsky is discussed in Chapter Five.) Yet if Preobrazhensky was the economist of the Left Opposition, then Serge was its historian. He represented the expression of the historical view of the revolution and its development from a Marxist perspective. His strengths were a critical intelligence, integrity and independence which prevented him from dogmatizing the revolution. These characteristics make imperative a clarification of the political critique embodied in his writings.

Serge's critique of the Soviet Union began very early: he argued that the Russian Revolution died a "self-inflicted death in 1918 with the establishment of the Cheka." Yet Serge worked with the Bolsheviks and supported their policies, including the demoralizing suppression of the Kronstadt rebellion. He joined the Opposition in 1923. Serge's concerns were always with the life and conditions of the masses of people affected by policy. Serge viewed Stalin's accession to power as a counter-revolution, a betrayal of everything the revolution stood for, and one of the bloodiest in history. His critique of the

'Stalinist system' formed the core of his work. Stalin's monopoly of power, his brutal anti-democratic methods of rule led to a certain type of society, which had not been envisioned by its revolutionary founders. Serge wrote that 'socialism in one country' had logical consequences which could not be avoided. He demonstrated, step by step, what the policy led to: forced collectivization, crash industrialization, super-exploitation, famine, sabotage, terror. The purges, proceeding from an internal dynamic set in motion by Stalin's methods of industrialization and rule, created new social relations and a new, unstable society based on coercion and terror. None of the basic problems of the society were resolved by the purges, but millions paid with their lives. A costly and wasteful industrial infrastructure was constructed, with the help of a massive slave labor sector in the camps. All forms of collective resistance were broken and any residual resistance was atomized, as the weary population concerned itself with survival, not politics. In order to consolidate his regime, Stalin wiped out the entire revolutionary generation of Bolsheviks, all Serge's comrades. The new society, dubbed a 'concentration camp universe' by Serge, was fundamentally anti-socialist, anti-democratic and anti-human.

On the eve of his final arrest in the Soviet Union, Serge managed to smuggle a letter to his friends in Paris, his 'last testament.' Although Serge was to survive, the ideas in the testament remained with him the rest of his life. The testament amounted to a declaration of the rights of man, and a defense of truth and thought which must be an integral part of the socialist project, without which the project is "false, bankrupt and spoiled." Serge's defense of all human beings, including 'class enemies' was a response to the Stalinist system of terror and murder. In this document Serge declared that he was the first to define the Soviet State as totalitarian.

Stalin's rule was chaotic and improvised, but it followed the logic of power. Once the bureaucracy usurped power from the

working class, an inexorable logic generated the terror. This 'bureaucracy' was often unable to dominate the forces it evoked, and the absence of control resulted in abuses going too far. Industrialization, collectivization and purges led to the formation of a new working class and a new ruling elite, with a particular relationship between the two. Serge spent the rest of his life trying to analyze and characterize the new social formation, to define its nature.

Serge finally defined the Soviet state as "bureaucratic totalitarian with collectivist leanings."² This assignation of the term totalitarian was different from the later totalitarian school of analysis just as his use of the words bureaucratic and collectivist differed from the 'bureaucratic collectivist' school. Serge's analysis was dynamic and non-dogmatic: neither the ideological clarion call of the later Cold Warriors, nor the sterile slogan of a left sect. He simply tried to understand the processes at work, and point to the consequences for human progress. The Soviet Union, to Serge, was neither capitalist nor socialist, operated out of fear of independent thought, was in permanent conflict with its own people, and directed a mighty totalitarian state machine against them.

His last writings are those of a solitary surviving Left Oppositionist trying to come to grips with the new society while upholding the principles of the Revolution. He evoked the people and the atmosphere of the times in his novels. In exile after the defeats of the thirties, Serge viewed the twin totalitarianisms of Stalinism and Fascism and tried to perceive the essential tendencies of the modern world, which he saw as 'collectivist,' controlled by an anti-democratic technocratic elite. The nemesis to this totalitarian collectivism, in Serge's view, was the historically conscious collectivism which would

²While the totalitarian school of analysis is well known, Serge believed he was the first to coin the term in describing the Stalinist system, which he saw as 'emergent' as early as 1921 during the period of War Communism.

emerge from decomposing capitalism and enfeebled Stalinism.

One of the most heated and divisive debates in Soviet studies during the eighties was between the older 'totalitarian' model of analysis and the newer 'revisionist' scholars who regard the Stalin period as one of chaos and lack of control. Criticizing both the ideas and the sources of the totalitarian school, the new revisionists claim the loss of life due to Stalin's policies has been greatly inflated.³

Both schools examine seemingly contradictory aspects of Soviet reality. Serge took up questions at issue in this debate at least twenty years earlier, demonstrating what I contend is a superior, though not entirely satisfactory, understanding. The Soviet state was totalitarian and incapable of totally controlling economic and political events; Serge's work grapples with this contradiction, without resolving it theoretically. Serge's treatment of this dilemma reflects the discussions that raged in Left Oppositionist and Left Menshevik circles, discussions reverberating in today's Soviet Union in the debate of 'plan vs. market.'

Later, working in isolation, Serge played out his ideas on the nature of planning versus totalitarian bureaucratic administration, though was only able to state the contradictions, not reconcile them. Socialist planning required a genuine workers democracy. Serge came to see Stalinist planning as non-planning, though he inconsistently continued to identify the Soviet Union as a planned economy. He ran into difficulties when he tried to generalize the tendencies he saw at work in both capitalism and the Soviet Union. His work reflects the enormous pressures Marxists faced during and immediately after World War II. At the same time he demonstrates the agility of his thinking, even though an insufficiently

³Ample examples of this debate exist in the discipline's journals and reviews, in the panels at the yearly AAASS conferences, and in the new titles published by University presses.

rigorous political economy mars his analysis.

Serge's work touches on another important debate in the discipline: vis was Stalinism the inevitable consequence of Bolshevism? Serge argued that Stalinism was not the natural outgrowth of Bolshevism, but the corruption of it. In a letter to Sidney Hook and in the pages of American socialist journals, Serge wrote there were seeds contained in Bolshevik thought which grew to full blown weeds under Stalin, but there were also other seeds which could have flowered into a new democracy, had circumstances been different. Notably, Serge insisted that a new democracy was what "Lenin and the others endeavored to establish with good will and passion in 1917-1918."

There is a paucity of scholarship on Victor Serge. No biography exists yet in any language,⁴ nor any major analytical studies; and while he is considered a French writer, there isn't a single doctoral dissertation on Serge in France. Only two dissertations exist on Serge, one British, one American. Both are in the fields of literature and are excellent studies, opening the door to future work on Serge's literary expression and his place in the tradition of committed modern writers. Thankfully, Serge scholarship is getting off the ground in this centenary year of his birth with three conferences, a projected film and several book collections devoted to Serge or containing his writings.

This dissertation is the first examination of Serge's political, social, literary and economic writings on the Soviet Union. It takes the form of political and intellectual history through a total investigation of Serge's life experiences and

⁴The situation will be remedied in the near future as Richard Greeman publishes his biography of Serge in France. Next year the Serge-Trotsky correspondence will be published in English by Pluto Press (I am contributing an introduction), and the journal Critique will devote a special issue to Serge which will include articles on Serge and some of Serge's unpublished essays.

his written work.

The primary sources for this dissertation are Serge's voluminous published and unpublished writings, and extensive interviews and correspondence with surviving comrades and relatives. Writing and researching this thesis has been a lot like detective work, carried out in many cities, and several countries. Vlady Kibalchich -- Mexico's well-known artist and Serge's son who shared most of Serge's experiences with him, including deportation in Orenburg, -- has been a valuable and treasured resource. I have also conducted interviews and correspondence with his daughter, Jeanine Kibalchich, his third wife Laurette Sejourne, surviving Left Oppositionist comrades in Mexico, the Soviet Union, and the United States. Serge's archive left in Mexico has been the richest source of material (containing thousands of pages of mainly unpublished essays, articles, correspondence and originals of novels); there is also the smaller Serge archive at Columbia (donated by Richard Greeman); the correspondence Serge conducted with Trotsky, Dwight and Nancy Macdonald, Daniel Benedite, Marcel Martinet, Sidney Hook, Max Schachtman, Julian Gorkin, Hryhory Kostiuik, George Orwell, and others; the thick FBI and Military Intelligence files on Serge obtained through several years of requests through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA);⁵ and the Hoover Institution has let me preview their sealed Trotsky collection within the Boris Nicolaevsky Papers, which contains seventy-five letters between Serge and Sedov (Trotsky's son and editor of the Bulletin of the Opposition). This is the first time anyone has examined these letters. Their existence was unknown before the death of Nicolaevsky's widow in 1982 permitted a thorough examination of the collection's contents.

I have been very fortunate to examine new, (hitherto

⁵I also obtained Marc Zborowsky's files, hoping in vain to find evidence of his role in the Trotsky-Serge rupture. So much was deleted from the file that whole pages were blanked out, with the exception of the name "Mark Zborowsky."

unknown) and unpublished Serge material of excellent quality which testify to the development of Serge's thought over a thirty year span. More primary source material for the dissertation came from the enormous quantity of journalism Serge produced in more than twenty publications in France, Belgium, Spain, the United States, Ukraine, Mexico and Chile. Serge's articles are mainly in French, but also in Russian, Spanish, and English. Secondary sources include the works of Serge's contemporaries, much of the vast memoir literature, and the the important secondary literature on the Soviet Union and Comintern for the years covered by the dissertation.

Serge's critique of Stalinism was the core of his life and his work. His life, Serge wrote in the Memoirs, was "integrated into history; we were interchangeable." He added that "the only meaning in life lies in conscious participation in the making of history." Serge was both social analyst and social activist, and his contribution to our understanding comes from his ability to see social reality clearly and honestly, and to write about it poetically.

His writings reflect his experiences, his commitment, and the vision which enabled him to survive this century's worst cataclysms, without recourse to pessimism. Serge described terrible suffering, while explaining how Stalinism came about, and what the Opposition would have done in its place. Consequently his bleakest descriptions still contain hope and an irrepressible optimism for a socialist future.

His writing 'style' is not the traditional "Marxist" one, but a literary-autobiographical-political one that transcends the boundaries of conventional literature and traditional social science. Serge's political task was not to engage in sterile sectarianism, but to speak up for those who could not speak for themselves.

When Serge turned his attention to theoretical analysis, we find he had no particular dogmas to uphold. His discussion of

the nature of the Stalinist system was one that avoided all the slogans that have characterized the debate which has divided the left for the last fifty years: one would look in vain through his writings to find the words 'degenerated workers state' or 'state capitalist.' He did use the term bureaucratic collectivist (twice) but in referring to a WWII Europe that included both the Stalinist totalitarian Soviet Union and the Nazi totalitarian fascist Germany. Serge preferred instead to describe the Soviet Union, to explain how the policies created on high affected ordinary people below, and how their reactions in turn affected the formulation and execution of policy. When Serge was dissatisfied with his own exposition in social scientific terms, he turned to literary forms to better express the vast political landscape. He did not avoid the political-economic debates, he brought new expressive language to them. Serge was an instinctive Marxist whose insights and critique have yet to be properly assessed, though they address issues which are at the heart of present controversies. Perhaps he has been more neglected because he fit no recognized political or literary tendency: it is hoped this contribution marks a revival of critical attention paid to this unique historical figure.

CHAPTER ONE IN THE SERVICE OF THE REVOLUTION: 1917-1921

1.1 On the way to Petrograd

The Russian Revolution of October 1917 ushered in a new epoch; a large country had broken from world capitalism and socialists from all over the world, whose attention had been on the "epoch of the cannon"¹ watched with hope and enthusiasm the development of the first society beginning its transition to socialism. For Europe, 1917 was the fourth year of the World War in which

"The flower of the youth of a continent, an entire generation of young men were mowed down ... along blood-soaked frontiers, thousands of combatants died each day ... [this was] the fourth year of the war for the partitioning of the globe among the financial imperialists."²

The events of October caught the imagination of revolutionaries everywhere; those who could, began to flock to Russia,

"Leaving the void and entering the kingdom of will ... where life is beginning anew, where conscious will, intelligence, and an inexorable love of mankind are in action. Behind us, all Europe is ablaze, having choked almost to death in the fog of its own massacres. Barcelona's flame smoulders on. Germany is in the thick of revolution, Austro-Hungary is splitting into free nations. Italy is spread with red flags....This is only the beginning."³

¹Victor Serge, From Lenin To Stalin, Monad Press, New York, 1973, p. 13. First French edition published in 1937.

²Victor Serge, Lenin: 1917, Ediciones Transicion, Mexico, 1977, pp. 19-20. First published in Paris as Lenine, 1917, Librairie du Travail, 1925, and reprinted with a new preface as Vingt ans apres: Paris, Cahiers Spartacus, 1937.

³Victor Serge, Memoirs of a Revolutionary, Writers and Readers, London, 1984, p. 67. First published as Memoires d'un revolutionnaire par Victor Serge, Editions du Seuil, 1951.

Leaving the void, and entering his never-seen homeland, was Victor Serge.

Evoking the images of war-torn and war-weary Europe, Serge recalls stopping with a group of his prisoner-comrades in a tavern filled with British soldiers. Serge had been released from 15 months incarceration in a French prison camp whose regime was notable for the lack of food and a Spanish flu epidemic that made death their constant companion. Serge was in a group of 40 "Bolshevik suspects" to be exchanged for French military officers held by the Russians. The shabby appearance of Serge and his group attracted the attention of the soldiers, who approached them. "Who are you?" Serge answered their questioning faces: "Bolsheviks. Prisoners. We are going to Russia."⁴ His message was understood: we are revolutionary internationalists on our way to begin the construction of socialism. The soldiers response surprised Serge: "Us too! We are too! Later you will see!"⁵ ["nosotros tambien! Nosotros tambien! Nosotros tambien lo somos! Ya lo vereis mas tarde!"] From his prison isolation, Serge hadn't understood the depth of inspiration produced by the successful October revolution, which was evident on these tired soldiers faces.

Serge reached his homeland expecting to enter into the first phase of the world revolution. "This is only the beginning." It was January 1919 when Serge set off, the first

⁴Serge's account of this encounter is in "camino de Rusia," first chapter of La Defensa de Petrogrado: Ano Segundo de la Revolucion Rusa, Mexico, Ediciones Transicion, 1977, pp. 85-6. Originally published as La Ville en Danger: L'An II de la Revolution Russe, Librairie du Travail, Paris 1924. A slightly different version is found in the Memoirs, p. 66.

⁵Victor Serge, La Defensa De Petrogrado: Ano Segundo de la Revolucion Rusa, p. 86. These 'tommies' affected Serge deeply; he also wrote of this encounter in the Memoirs (see 4n above) and in Birth of Our Power, p. 244. Here we see how Serge's novels blur the lines between fact and fiction.

days of February when he arrived. The revolution was in its second year. It had taken Serge 18 months to make the trip.

Serge had gone to Spain upon his release from prison and expulsion from France in 1917. In the middle of the insurrectionist street fighting of July 1917, Serge left, drawn like a magnet to the distant revolutionary beacon of Russia. He was not only 'leaving the void' he was leaving behind him his anarchist past. Serge was disillusioned with the anarchists' inability to confront the question of power⁶, and impressed by this very characteristic of the Bolsheviks. He tried to reach Russia, via France, and was arrested for violating his expulsion order, and thrown into a French prison camp as a Bolshevik suspect.

1.2. Serge encounters Bolshevism and Marxism

Although Serge was not yet a Bolshevik, he was on his way. His commitment was strengthened by his 15 months at Precigne,⁷ where Serge joined with the other Russian revolutionaries to form a discussion group. Here Serge studied Marxism for the first time. While arguing with the only real Bolshevik there (the rest were, like Serge, suspected Bolsheviks), Serge put forward the idea of a libertarian, democratic revolution, while the Bolshevik favored a merciless dictatorship and an authoritarian revolution. Serge admitted that theoretically, he

⁶Serge didn't stay for the final insurrection in Barcelona in August, 1917. He had seen enough in July: the anarchists would not hear any talk of seizure of power. Only his friend, the syndicalist leader Salvadore Segui, seemed aware that they had no plan beyond the street fighting. Serge said they went into battle "as it were, in the dark." (Memoirs, p. 56.)

⁷Serge's description of his experiences at Precigne form the middle section of his second novel, Birth of Our Power, and is also described in the Memoirs, pps.63-69. Pierre Pascal, a French Communist living in Moscow who married Serge's sister-in-law, later wrote a four part memoir called Mon Journal de Russie, L'Age d'Homme, Lausanne. In the second volume Pascal described Serge's study group in Precigne, p. 107.

stated his point of view badly, worse than the Bolshevik, though "from the human standpoint, we were infinitely nearer the truth than he was."⁸ According to the Memoirs and Birth of Our Power, the prisoners studied Marx's Civil War in France, kept abreast of events in Russia and discussed all the questions facing the Bolsheviks. Serge was acquiring the Marxist method of analysis which remained with him till his death.⁹

What Serge already had in common with the Bolsheviks was his praxis: Serge was a man of revolutionary practice, who translated his words into deeds time and again throughout his life. His actions in Germany 1923 are one case in point, which we will return to later. Revolutionary theory put into practice: this is what impressed Serge about the Bolsheviks. In his retrospective on the 30th anniversary of the Russian revolution, Serge wrote that "the unity between thought and action" was one of the characteristics of the Bolsheviks which gave them an

⁸Serge, Memoirs, pps. 63-4.

⁹Richard Greeman notes in his unpublished dissertation, Victor Serge: The Making of a Novelist (1890-1928), Columbia University, 1968, (Hereafter, Greeman) that in the camp "Kibalchich thought out the problems of revolution for the first time and acquired the thorough Marxist foundation that was to guide, but not dominate, his thinking in the future." p. 152. The question of Serge's Marxism is thus raised; my contention is that Serge's subsequent writing and activity demonstrate that he had absorbed Marxist method and used it throughout his lifetime. He acted as an instinctive Marxist and a consistent revolutionary. Whether or not it guided him or dominated his thinking, however is not a semantic difference. Greeman asserts that the formative influences of Serge's life, came from his anarchist - prison - syndicalist years of 1908-1918; that his love for freedom and his abhorrence of authoritarianism are residuals of his anarchist past. (Sedgwick would not agree that Serge abhorred authoritarianism.) The inference is that these qualities must be brought to Marxism and are not part of the Marxist tradition. Lenin and Trotsky would agree with Serge's concern for the life of the individual within the mass. The implication in Greeman's line of reasoning is that the humanist side of Marxism is anarchism. Serge himself made no such qualification. See also this chapter, pp. 16.

innate superiority over the rival parties with which they shared a common outlook.¹⁰

What did Serge find in the land of will which expressed the suppressed aspirations of all humankind in struggle? "A world frozen to death ... a metropolis of Cold, of Hunger, of Hatred, of Endurance"¹¹ Year Two: Serge managed to arrive in the midst of counterrevolution, white terror answered by red terror, famine, and disease, to a city expectant of a world revolution which would save them. His romantic hopes were met with a harsh reality, which Serge does not hesitate to express. The first shock was not the cold, or what he described as the worst food (black bread and dried fish) any of them had ever eaten. It was the first newspaper filled not with "popular ferment, bubbling ideas, rivalry of clubs [and] parties,"¹² but with an article signed by G. Zinoviev on 'The Monopoly of Power.' Serge quoted from memory: "Our Party rules alone ... it will not allow anyone The false democratic liberties demanded by the counter-revolution." The newspaper, Severnaya Kommuna, was dated January 1919.

Serge was hit in the face with the basic dilemmas which were to concern him for the rest of his life: could revolution be separate from freedom? Could acts which are justified by a state of siege and 'mortal perils' be elevated into a theory, based on the extinction of freedom?¹³ Serge's worries were at

¹⁰Victor Serge, "Trente Ans Apres La Revolution Russe," in La Revolution Proletarienne, November 1947.

¹¹Serge, Memoirs, p. 71.

¹²Ibid., p. 69.

¹³Serge's use of the word 'freedom' here and elsewhere is vague. For Marxists, freedom is indistinguishable from institutions of popular democracy, usually in the form of councils. Anarchists, on the other hand, favor participatory democracy and community control, but are wary of democratic institutions -- even workers' councils. They tend to be very 'slippery' in their definitions of freedom and democracy.

the same time premature and prescient. 1919 had seen a choking of liberties due to Civil War conditions, but there was still freedom of debate within the Party.

1.3. In Revolutionary Russia

Serge's first impressions of Petrograd tell us a lot about the early days of the revolution.¹⁴ The Finland Station, where Lenin had delivered his famous "April Theses" was deserted; in fact the city, covered in snow and ice, looked abandoned. The people Serge and his group did see looked frozen and hungry ("A gaunt soldier" ... "a woman freezing under her shawls"). In the one year since the seizure of power, the population of Petrograd had fallen from a million to "scarcely 700,000 souls." But the people Serge met were open and curious about the political situation in Europe: "All they asked us was whether Europe would soon be kindled: 'What is the French proletariat waiting for before it seizes power?'"¹⁵ Serge found the same attitude everywhere; nurtured on the knowledge that the Russian revolution was but the first -- Lenin often said it was "a terrible misfortune that the honour of beginning the first Socialist revolution should have befallen the most backward

¹⁴Serge was at his best when evoking the atmosphere of the new revolution in the midst of peril and ice in the final chapter of Birth of our Power. He related the story of being housed with a family in Petrograd in an abandoned apartment of a former Counselor of the Empire. The rooms were large and there was no fuel for heat. They congregated in the nursery, the smallest room. For warmth, they burned the massive tomes of the Collection of the Laws of The Empire. The scene works as literature, politics, history, and irony. Richard Greeman has subjected the scene to an insightful analysis in his article " 'The laws are burning' -- Literary and Revolutionary Realism in Victor Serge," Yale French Studies, No. 39, 1967, pp. 146-159. Serge confirmed in his Memoirs (p. 116) that the scene actually took place, and that he took great pleasure in burning the now obsolete statutes of Imperial repression.

¹⁵V. Serge, Memoirs, pps. 70-71.

people in Europe" --they all knew they were doomed without an international extension of the revolution.

In Serge's opinion, they were too optimistic about the imminence of European revolution. Serge had just come from the West, where 13 years of political activity had filled him with disgust for the parliamentary opportunism of the social democratic misleaders, and impatience with the ultimate irresponsibility of the anarchists who abdicated on the question of power. Where was the revolutionary party to lead the European masses to revolution? But many of the leading Bolsheviks, including Trotsky and Lenin, had also lived abroad during the years between the two Russian revolutions and also knew the weaknesses of the socialist leaders; was their optimism based more on hope than real assessment? Or on their analysis of objective conditions ripening, to produce cleavages and form new leaders?

Zinoviev, then President of the Soviet, met Serge's perception of the sluggishness of the unfolding revolutionary process in the West, especially in France, where Serge said no revolutionary upheaval could be expected for a long time, with "It's easy to tell that you are no Marxist. History cannot stop halfway."¹⁶

Serge met Zinoviev's wife Lilina, People's Commissar for Social Planning in the Northern Commune, who told him to go with his family to Moscow where conditions were better. He did not take her advice, deciding to stay in Petrograd, the revolution's front line city. He immediately set about to talk with everyone, to mix in all the social and political milieux to get a political grounding. Of the democratic intellectuals, Serge said:

"If the Bolshevik insurrection had not taken power ... the cabal of the old generals, supported by the officers' organizations, would have certainly done so instead. Russia would have avoided the Red Terror

¹⁶Serge, Ibid. p. 71-2,

only to endure the White, and a proletarian dictatorship only to undergo a reactionary one. In consequence, the most outraged observations of the anti-Bolshevik intellectuals only revealed to me how necessary Bolshevism was."¹⁷

1.4.From Anarchism to Bolshevism

Serge decided that he was neither against the Bolsheviks nor neutral; he was with them. He wrote in one of his first letters from Russia that he would not make "a career out of the revolution, and, once the mortal danger has passed, [he would] ... join again with those who will fight the evils of the new regime...."¹⁸

Serge arrived in Russia as a seasoned revolutionary armed with "a critical method, doubt and assurance" and thirteen years experience as a socialist, anarchist and syndicalist. His political positions flowed from a concrete analysis of actual situations. Serge's allegiance to the Bolsheviks was based on a sober assessment of the situation, which was grave; he determined that the Bolsheviks had not only vision, but the necessary will to carry forward the revolution. Their political positions were correct, but Serge was already critical of their authoritarian excesses. He wasn't critical only of curbs on freedom he saw as justified by the revolution's mortal peril; he had been to Moscow, and also objected to the stultifying structures -- the committees on top of Councils, managements on top of Commissions -- in which he saw the perfect breeding ground for "a multitude of bureaucrats who were responsible for more fuss than honest work."¹⁹ They were the 'smart set,' decorated in 'chic uniforms' who sent you from office to office.

¹⁷Ibid. p. 74.

¹⁸Serge, ibid.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 74.

Serge joined the Bolshevik Party in May 1919. But he still kept company with poets, writers, anarchists and Social Revolutionaries. He belonged to the "last free thought society" and was probably their "only Communist member." This was the Free Philosophic Society led by the symbolist novelist Andrei Bely. As a confirmed, but critical Bolshevik, Serge was developing his Marxism.

Serge's Marxism was fused with an anarchist's spirit and a primary commitment to socialism's international character. His Marxism was deeply humanistic, preoccupied with questions of personal development and individual freedom within the social whole. His central concern with the condition of life of the masses always meant that Serge saw democracy as an integral component of socialist development. It is not a question of these aspects of Serge's Marxism coming only from Anarchism: Marxism is not devoid of humanism, nor is it simply a formula for action. Serge did not become a Marxist simply because the Bolshevik-Marxists knew what to do next: but because their ultimate vision of socialism was one that liberated humanity, a vision he shared.

Anarchism had become a dead end for Serge, as early as 1913, as Richard Greeman attests,²⁰ when the goals of the anarchist bandits of the Bonnot gang led them to violent acts of murder and robbery. Serge was repulsed by these senseless acts, but shared the goals motivating them,²¹ and ended up in jail when the French judicial system failed to account for this subtle distinction. At least the violence of the Bolsheviks (at this point) was used to fight for their survival. The anarchists seemed much better at pontificating than at moving forward.

²⁰Richard Greeman, op. cit., p. 154.

²¹Serge wrote in an article entitled "Les Bandits" in the 4 January 1912 edition of L'Anarchie: "Je suis avec les bandits." A long passage of this article is quoted in Greeman, ibid., p. 116.

Marxists judge people not just by what they say, but by what they do. Serge found the anarchists wanting in the latter, not just by their lack of clear policy, but in the case of (some of) the Russian anarchists, by their failure to support the Bolsheviks, in effect their objective support of the counter-revolution.²² Serge admitted that anarchism was more a way of conducting one's life, whereas Bolshevism embodied a technique of revolution that fit its theory of social emancipation.²³

Nevertheless what Serge did retain of his anarchism was a healthy opposition to authoritarianism. Greeman emphasizes Serge's "total opposition to all forms of authoritarianism"²⁴ while another scholar, Peter Sedgwick, posits a contradiction in Serge's attitude to authoritarianism, stating that for an anarchist turned Bolshevik, Serge's earlier writings are remarkably devoid of public criticism of the authoritarian side of Bolshevik rule.²⁵ In Serge's later writings of this period, particularly the Civil War novel Conquered City, he is "alert to

²²See inter alia Paul Avrich, Anarchists in the Russian Revolution, Serge, Les Anarchistes et la Revolution russe, Memoirs, From Lenin to Stalin, his numerous articles in Bulletin Communiste, and Clarte; also Leon Trotsky, History of the Russian Revolution, Alfred Rosmer, Moscow Under Lenin, pps. 97-101, among numerous other works.

²³Serge, "La Pensee anarchiste," p.12.

²⁴Greeman, ibid., p, 155.

²⁵This is a confusion of Sedgwick's not Serge's. Serge himself recognizes the authoritarian characters which have populated the anarchist movement, starting with Bakunin himself, and not ending with Makhno. As Serge points out, the essence of anarchism is the absence of authority; this does not mean that authoritarianism cannot exist within figures who oppose authority. Sedgwick and Greeman do not see this distinction, but Serge did. Serge, "L'Anarchisme," unpublished essay written in the 40s (no date provided), archives, Mexico.

the authoritarian worm in the bud of revolution."²⁶ Yet in his writings of the early 20s there is no such criticism, and Sedgwick says "Serge's public political alignment is an uncritical retailing of the official legitimations of Bolshevik statism."²⁷ The question raised here is whether Serge acted in a somewhat dishonest way, as a propagandist for the Bolsheviks, while being privately critical of the society emerging,²⁸ or what kind of a contradiction this reveals in Serge. Serge's son Vlady explained away the 'apparent' contradiction: these were "early days" for the Bolsheviks, too early to come out with pronouncements about the character of the society being formed.²⁹ In any case it was impossible to tell what would happen once the immediate danger of foreign intervention and Civil War passed. We will return to Sedgwick's criticism after examining Serge's synthesis of Marxism and anarchism.

Serge did not try some impossible mix of anarchism and Bolshevism, he became a Bolshevik, and subsequently a Left Oppositionist, and never returned to anarchism. His later opposition was not to Bolshevism, but to its corruption,

²⁶Peter Sedgwick, "The Unhappy Elitist: Victor Serge's Early Bolshevism," published posthumously in History Workshop Journal, Vol. 17, Spring 1984, pp. 150-156.

²⁷Sedgwick, ibid., p. 151.

²⁸Sedgwick quotes from Guerin's book on anarchism, in which Serge apparently told Gaston Leval that the Communists were establishing a "dictatorship over the proletariat" while publishing pro-regime journalism abroad. See Sedgwick's article on Serge's Early Bolshevism, p. 152, and p. 156n.

²⁹Recorded conversation with Vlady in Mexico City, Feb. 1986. Vlady's answer shows that both he and his father took the same position as any revolutionary Marxist would in similar circumstances. Many revolutionary organizations have approached questions of determining the class character of this or that revolution in the same manner. For example, with regard to the Cuban revolution and the Nicaraguan revolution, the reasoning is that it is better to come out late with a negative assessment of the revolution's development than too early.

Stalinism. His preoccupation with the masses, with democracy (is this not the question of freedom?) was shared by other Left Oppositionists, Marxists all, particularly Trotsky.

The view that Bolsheviks and Marxists are manipulative and authoritarian, while undoubtedly true in certain cases, is a part of the Stalinist legacy that distorts Marxism. Serge himself addressed this point many times in the years to come: he admitted that authoritarian seeds existed in Bolshevik thought which grew to full blown weeds under Stalin, but there were also many other seeds that could have flowered into a full blown democracy had circumstances existed for their germination.³⁰

Serge tried to win the anarchists over to Bolshevism, to get them to draw the same conclusions as he had. He wrote a pamphlet for the purpose, called Les Anarchistes et L'Experience de la Revolution russe. This booklet was written in the summer of 1920,³¹ and published in Paris in 1921; later he wrote three essays, "Meditation sur l'anarchie," "La pensee anarchiste" published in 1937 and 1938, and "L'Anarchisme," left among his unpublished essays from his exile in Mexico. In the first three, Serge discusses the relative merits of anarchism and Marxism, looking for a point of synthesis. Serge was aware of both the pluses and minuses of the two theories. Marxism was superior analytically and organizationally, but would be enhanced with the spirit of humanistic idealism of the anarchists. This idealism of the anarchist tradition, which was a sort of morality, would serve as a corrective to the tendency in Bolshevism to subordinate their revolutionary, democratic principles to practical necessity, or the force of

³⁰ "Marxism et Democratie," letter from Serge to Sidney Hook, May 1943. Serge Archives, Mexico.

³¹ The book was written before the banning of Party factions. Sedgwick intimates that the factions banned had positions which closely corresponded to Serge's. See Peter Sedgwick, introduction to Serge's Memoirs of a Revolutionary, p. xii.

circumstances.³² Anarchism was better as a way of conducting one's life, but not as a theory of change. Serge wrote in the last mentioned essay that anarchism was well suited to the terrain of pre-industrialized countries among artisans and petty-producers; but in the heart of industrial countries, Marxism had largely surpassed and eliminated anarchism.³³

Serge's point of synthesis was more of a plea for humanity and liberty within Bolshevik practice; neither of which are qualities alien to Marxism. Serge's writings show more how he had matured and rejected anarchism, but found Bolshevik practice wanting and looked back to anarchism for the qualities he would have wished present in Bolshevik practice. Even here Serge presents the contradictions; anarchists have been authoritarian even while opposing authority; and the Bolsheviks' Marxist conception of the individual's relation to history -- individuals as parts of historical forces -- paradoxically increased the value of the individuals.³⁴ The other side of the coin of anarchist individualism, Serge noted, was to reduce everything to the self, while the Marxist notion of class, of individuals consciously acting in collectivities in the process of history became in Bolshevik thinking a theory of struggle enabling individuals acting in solidarity to accomplish profound social change. Thus, the practical effectiveness of class action actually enhanced the importance of the individual. Serge explained this apparent paradox in "Meditation sur l'anarchie":

"Les masses important lus que toi. On est remis a sa place, gueri de l'hypertrophie du Moi, vilaine maladies. Parce que tu as consenti a te perdre, tu te retrouveras et fortifie d'avoir touche la terre ferme. Le marxisme, en subordonnant l'individu a l'histoire -

³²Greeman, *ibid* pp. 153-61, discusses Serge's anarchism and Marxism.

³³"L'Anarchisme," unpublished typescript, no date, Mexico, archives.

³⁴Greeman, *ibid.*, p. 158.

- que sont les masses -- le penetre d'une confiance peut-etre sans bornes; voici qu'ayant renonce a l'exaltation de sa petite revolte personnelle, s'etant en quelque sorte depouille de lui-meme, il multiplie sa force et sa volonte par celles de tous et par celle de l'histoire, mythe scientifique.³⁵

In his balance sheet Les Anarchistes et L'Experience de la Revolution Russe, Serge pointed out that the Russian anarchists had failed as revolutionaries, by remaining outside the revolution. Although many fought in the Civil War, they had presented no alternative libertarian program to the Bolsheviks. Worse, some took up arms against the new workers state and became objectively counter-revolutionary.³⁶

The Bolsheviks, as Serge points out elsewhere, proved themselves superior in method, program and practice. Their failures did not result from shortcomings in their theory, but arose in response to real circumstances. "The proletarian dictatorship has, in Russia, had to introduce an increasingly authoritarian centralism. One may perhaps deplore it. Unfortunately I do not believe that it could have been avoided."³⁷

The anarchists on the other hand, lacked the will of the Bolsheviks, the unity of thought and deed, and at essential

³⁵ "Meditation sur l'Anarchie," published in Esprit, March, 1937, Paris.

³⁶ Serge had considered the betrayal of the "blacks" under Makhno, who had tried to build an anarchist federation while defending themselves against both Whites and Reds, a terrible crime of the Bolsheviks, with a demoralizing effect that was one of the basic causes of the Kronstadt rebellion. Memoirs, p. 123. But he also said the anarchists had abdicated in front of their duty to the revolution. Les Anarchistes et l'experience de la revolution russe, pp. 17-26. Quoted in Greeman, ibid, p. 159.

³⁷ Les Anarchistes et l'experience de la Revolution Russe, Cahiers du Travail, Paris, 1921, p.29. The quotation cited demonstrates how Serge was very careful in his analysis of the Russian revolution and its subsequent degeneration, to distinguish the avoidable from the unavoidable aspects -- and shows how Serge's analysis was rooted in concrete circumstances.

moments -- in real circumstances-- they were politically bankrupt: in Spain (1917) they abnegated power, and in Russia they fought against it. The anarchists, Serge said in his *Memoirs*, "had an essentially emotional approach to theory, were ignorant of political economy and had never faced the problem of power" and "found it practically impossible to achieve any theoretical understanding of what was going on."³⁸ Serge agreed with Lenin and Trotsky that it was important to have the support of the best among them. Serge also said that the anarchists could play a creative role within the revolution as the guardians of the revolution's idealism, working for greater freedom within the revolution by insisting on the control of the masses over the revolutionary institutions.³⁹ "Their [the anarchists turned communists] lucidity will make them the most formidable enemies of the climbers, the budding politicians and commissars, the formalists, pundits and intriguers."⁴⁰

1.5. Serge the Bolshevik in Comintern and Civil War

Serge joined the Bolsheviks after months of discussions with various political tendencies. Of the Bolsheviks he met, he found them sincere, honest, with bitterly clear vision; except Zinoviev, who affected Serge as flabby, a man of puffed

³⁸Serge, *Memoirs*, p. 104.

³⁹Greeman, *Ibid.*, p. 160.

⁴⁰Serge, *Les Anarchistes et l'experience de la Revolution russe*, p. 44.

confidence, comfortable at the pinnacle of power.⁴¹ Serge also befriended Maxim Gorky, who had been a friend of Serge's mother's family at Nizhni-Novgorod. Gorky was a non-Bolshevik critical intellectual whom Serge admired as "the supreme, the righteous, the relentless witness of the Revolution."⁴²

Gorky offered Serge work in his publishing house "Universal Literature" but Serge declined, because his duty was to the revolution, to work within the revolution while retaining his critical sense. Serge decided to eschew posts of importance and responsibility, to remain at the ground level of the revolution.⁴³ This attitude, while on the one hand demonstrates that Serge's allegiance to the Bolsheviks contained not a shred of opportunism, also shows his assertion of independence as a leftover from his anarchism. A 'good Bolshevik' of the non-opportunist type like Serge may not wish to be cast into the limelight of leadership, but would also not decline such positions if it was deemed necessary to enhance the quality of leaders of the revolution. Personal wishes and political tasks

⁴¹Memoirs, pp. 71-2.

⁴²Memoirs, p. 73.

⁴³This desire to remain at the rank-and-file level may account for the absence of Serge's name in any of the Histories of the early Comintern, with the exception of Hulse's book. But although Serge may have functioned at 'ground level' he was also an intimate of the top Bolshevik leadership, a colleague of Zinoviev, Lenin, Trotsky, and others. Greeman also points out that both Souvarine and Henri Guilbeaux deny (against available evidence) that Serge played an important role in Russia, which he attributes to a certain jealousy of Serge's notoriety in the wake of L'Affair Victor Serge of 1936. See Greeman, op. cit., p.191.

often come into conflict. Revolutionaries of the Bolshevik mould were sometimes called upon to put Party needs before their own.

In Victor Serge's case, working for the revolution meant working in its propagandistic organs, putting his talents to good use. Ironically, Serge's first job was as a journalist for the newspaper of the Petrograd Soviet, Severnaya Kommuna (Northern Commune), the same newspaper Serge had first read with horror upon crossing the Finnish border into Russia. Like the majority of other Bolsheviks at the time, Serge worked at many jobs: he was also a teacher in public education clubs, an organizing inspector for schools, and a lecturing assistant to the Petrograd militia. These many jobs brought him "the means of bare existence from one day to the next, in a chaos that was oddly organized."⁴⁴ Serge was married by now to Liuba Roussakova, whose family had traveled with Serge to Petrograd.

The Communist International was formed in March 1919, and although Serge was not yet a member of the Bolshevik Party, he was asked by Zinoviev to organize the administration of the Executive Committee in Petrograd.⁴⁵ Serge's political experience in Europe meant he was ideally suited to Comintern work. The Russian revolution, for the Bolsheviks, (and for Victor Serge) it will be recalled, was but "the beginning." At the top of their historical agenda was the world socialist

⁴⁴Memoirs, p. 76.

⁴⁵Memoirs, p. 77.

revolution. They envisioned the achievement of power reaching fruition only through the world revolution, which would establish a socialist commonwealth comprising all the advanced sectors of the globe. Like Victor Serge, the Bolsheviks were both Russian and world revolutionists. There was no essential separation between their national revolution and the world struggle for socialism; the two were inextricably linked.⁴⁶ The founding of the Third International, or Communist International (Comintern) was but the concretization of this political principle.⁴⁷ The initial manifesto of the Communist International was written by Trotsky, in which he extended

⁴⁶Background information on the Comintern used here comes from Leon Trotsky, The First Five Years of the Communist International, Theses and Resolutions of the first four congresses of the Communist International, Jane Degras, Serge, Lenin, Cole, Helmut Gruber, Borkenau, Hulse, etc. in bibliography. Also, from 50 Years of World Revolution, article by Canadian.

⁴⁷ Ironically, the founding of the Third International came upon the heels of defeat in Germany and the executions of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. As we have noted earlier, Serge thought the Bolsheviks overestimated the readiness of Europe for revolution. This assessment did not keep him from working toward that goal, which he shared with the Bolsheviks. The question arises nevertheless, how Trotsky, Lenin, and Serge to a lesser extent, all of whom had spent considerable time in Europe and knew the weaknesses of the European socialist leaders (most of whom had supported World War I), could expect them to ride the wave of revolutionary upsurge to a successful conclusion. Deutscher intimates that had they known the real situation, they may not have founded the International which was "fathered by wish, mothered by confusion, and assisted by accident." He also suggests they assumed that in real revolutionary situations, the small European Marxist sects would rise rapidly to influence and leadership, just as the Bolsheviks did. Deutscher, The Prophet Armed, Trotsky: 1879-1921, Oxford University Press, 1970, p. 451-3.

Marx's historic statement in the Communist Manifesto. Trotsky wrote:

"Proletarians of all countries! In the struggle against imperialist barbarism, against monarchy, against the privileged classes, against the bourgeois state and bourgeois property, against national oppression and the tyranny of classes in any shape or form--unite!

Proletarians of all countries, round the banner of workmen's councils, round the banner of the revolutionary struggle for power and the dictatorship of the proletariat, round the banner of the Third International -- unite!"⁴⁸

Serge took part in the first 3 Congresses of the Comintern, used his offices to intercede when he could on behalf of victims of the Cheka, met through his work the leaders of the international revolutionary movements, (of whom he drew thumbnail portraits in his Memoirs), and like all his comrades, performed a host of functions: he ran the Romance-language section and publications of the International, met the foreign delegates who arrived "by adventurous routes through the blockade's barbed-wire barrier,"⁴⁹ became a trooper in the Communist battalion of the Second District during the Civil War, engaged in smuggling arms between Russia and Finland, became a Commissar in charge of the archives of the old Ministry of the Interior, the Okhrana.

The Comintern was perfectly suited to Serge: it shared Serge's disgust for the spineless and opportunist parliamentary social democratic leaders of the European workers movement; its

⁴⁸Leon Trotsky, "Manifesto of the Communist Internationals to the Proletarian of the World," March 1919.

⁴⁹Serge, Memoirs, p. 89. Rosmer, in his Moscow Under Lenin, describes Serge as "the best possible guide" because of his political background, his knowledge of languages, his experiences in the labor movement in various European countries, and his curiosity about what was exactly happening in the Western democracies and his desire to show the visiting delegates of the Comintern the Russian revolution from the inside. See Rosmer, ibid., pps, 35-36.

revolutionary internationalism and political vision matched Serge's; and it was made up of men and women like Serge. People such as the Russo-Italian socialist and first Secretary, Angelica Balabanova, the Canadian anarchist Bill Shatov, the American revolutionary journalist John Reed, the Spanish syndicalist Angel Pestana, the Italian maximalist Amadeo Bordiga, the French syndicalist Alfred Rosmer, and many others. Serge admitted that it was in these first meetings that the "superiority of the Russians, compared with the foreign revolutionaries amazed me."⁵⁰ Serge befriended Vladimir Mazin, his assistant and comrade whose revolutionary record was at least as long as his own.

Serge clearly had a deep affection for Mazin, and Serge's son Vlady was named for him.⁵¹ When the Civil War threatened the revolution, Mazin did as he had written: "he renounced his command, picked up a rifle, collected a little band of Communists and tried to stop the rout and the enemy simultaneously. ... [For Mazin, there was] no point in doing jobs of organization, publishing, etc., which were fruitless from now on; and at an hour when so many men were dying quite uselessly out in the wilds, he felt a horror of Smolny offices, committees, printed matter and the Hotel Astoria." Zinoviev had him appointed political commissar, but Mazin demanded to be given a private's rifle. He died at the hands of the Whites.

Mazin, who had begun as a Menshevik and had become a Bolshevik, shared Serge's view that the only way to fight for democratic and libertarian ideals was in action, within the revolution. Serge and Mazin stayed at the Hotel Astoria and worked in the Comintern Headquarters in the Smolny Institute of Petrograd. Although Balabanova was nominally the first

⁵⁰Serge, Memoirs, p. 83.

⁵¹Suggested by Greeman, op. cit., p. 184, and confirmed in an interview I recorded with Vlady Kibalchich, Mexico City, May 1987.

Secretary of the Executive Committee and Zinoviev the first President, she lived in Moscow, and he stayed in Petrograd as head of the Petrograd Soviet. So the Executive Committee was divided between Petrograd and Moscow, and since Zinoviev was in Petrograd, that is where the real power resided. Thus Serge and Mazin, both critical communists, were at the seat of power in the Comintern, creating the organization from scratch.⁵² That was the extent of the staff of the organization which would coordinate the activities of the world revolution: two people! After Mazin's death, Serge continued alone.⁵³

Serge's knowledge of languages and his experience as an editor were put to good use as a propagandist in the Comintern. Serge wrote dozens of articles in the journals of the Comintern. Serge himself describes his activities as emissary, functionary, secretary editor, translator, printer, organizer, director, 'member of the collegium' and more.⁵⁴

Serge's frenetic activity in the Comintern took place, it must be remembered, at the height of the Civil War, in Petrograd, which was threatened by British troops and the White General Yudenich. The battle of Petrograd was the subject of two of Serge's books: Pendant la Guerre Civile: Petrograd, mai-juin

⁵²Greeman, op. cit., p. 181-200. James Hulse notes, in his book The Forming of the Communist International, Stanford University Press, 1964, that Serge and Mazin, "who were virtually conscripted for their assignments with the Comintern, found it ironical that they should have been singled out to organize and plan the world revolution." Ibid., p. 26. Hulse's book on the Comintern is almost singular in mentioning Serge's role in its early history, and his sources are Serge himself, in the Memoirs, and in his early articles for L'Internationale Communiste 7/8, Nov. Dec. 1919, Stockholm reprint. It is curious that no other authoritative sources seem to exist to corroborate Serge's Memoirs (and Hulse's book) on a subject of such significance as the formation of the Communist International.

⁵³James Hulse, op.cit. pps. 24-29.

⁵⁴Serge, From Lenin to Stalin, p. 35.

1919; and La Ville en danger: Petrograd, L'an II de la revolution⁵⁵. Serge's activities in the Comintern were frequently interrupted by the immediate needs of the city's peril. Serge was worried that should the city fall, the archives of the Okhrana may fall again into the hands of reactionaries, which would provide "precious weapons for tomorrow's hangmen and firing-squads."⁵⁶ Serge saw to it that the archives were packed in boxes and ready to be smuggled out or burned at the last moment. He returned to these archives later, in 1920, when he wrote an article published in the French journal Bulletin Communiste, Nos. 50 and 51, of November 1921. These articles became the book Les Coulisses d'une Surete generale. Ce que tout revolutionnaire devrait savoir sur la repression. The English edition was titled What Everyone Should Know About State Repression, and it is one of Serge's most well-known works.⁵⁷

But in 1919, Serge's concern was with the survival of Petrograd and the revolution: "It seemed, quite plainly," he

⁵⁵These short books, unlike his history of the first year, Year One of the Russian Revolution, are eyewitness accounts with all the immediacy of a participant with inside knowledge. They are more anecdotal and passionate but no less honest or revelatory. The frailties of individuals are highlighted, as in Serge's depiction of the anarchist in charge of taking captured White guards to jail: out of softness and remembrance of a not so distant time when the anarchist himself was imprisoned, he let the Whites go. Serge calls this "libertarian craziness," an act of "generosity which if it had been repeated, would have meant the suicide of the revolution." The whole story, recounted in La Defensa del Petrogrado, Ano II, pp. 118-120 is worth reading for its style, and its underlying point, which is to show the problems anarchists faced when their ideas confronted reality.

⁵⁶Serge, Memoirs, p. 90

⁵⁷A pirate edition of this book was reissued by the French police as an internal education document for the use of their 'employées' during the 1960s. See Jean Riere's note to English edition, 1978.

said, "to be our death-agony."⁵⁸ Children were evacuated, known militants tried to change their appearance; Serge spent his nights with Communist troops, and his pregnant wife slept in the back of an ambulance.

The siege of Petrograd tested the endurance of the the hungry, frozen, and choking revolution. The victory over the Whites at Petrograd was organized by Trotsky, described by Serge as a real leader, whose energy, organization and confidence saved the city, by convincing the workers that 15,000 Whites couldn't possibly "master a working class capital of 700,000 inhabitants."⁵⁹ Both Sedgwick and Greeman agree that it was Trotsky's appearance at the Tauride and his saving Petrograd from the approaching Yudenich that began Serge's three decade long devotion to Trotsky.⁶⁰

Fighting for the revolution in the Civil War was clearly a seminal experience for Serge. Politically, it meant that he saw the real choices open to the Bolsheviks, and the heroic sacrifices demanded of them. Serge held the Civil War generation of revolutionary fighters in the highest esteem; later he criticized others, like the Yugoslav Left Oppositionist Anton Ciliga, who were quick to judge the Bolsheviks, without understanding the perils they faced when the revolution was at

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Memoirs, p. 92.

⁶⁰ Sedgwick, however, in his article "The Unhappy Elitist, Victor Serge's Early Bolshevism", which appeared posthumously in History Workshop Journal, Vol 17, Spring 1984, says Serge admired Trotsky for all the wrong reasons: for his "force, intellect, zeal in communication" and not for his commitment to the values of libertarian socialism. Sedgwick's criticism is ahistorical; Serge was not admiring of authoritarianism, but of concrete, decisive action to defend the revolution so that the construction of the first socialist society on the globe could begin. The article reveals more about Sedgwick than about Serge.

death's door.⁶¹ The hard choices made by both Lenin and Trotsky in this period, recognized as drastic but necessary measures, were supported wholeheartedly by Serge. It was only later that Serge looked back and was able to see the cardinal errors made - the gravest of which was the creation of the Cheka, and began to theorize about the nature of 'emergent totalitarianism.'

1.6. Serge's Civil War Writings

Although Serge took the conscious decision to be a writer in 1928, he wrote a good deal before that. His Civil War writings, which are voluminous, were written both close to the events themselves, and again in the later period upon reflection. His articles on the Civil War were published in La vie Ouvriere (March 1921- July 1926), Bulletin Communiste (13 articles from April 1921, to Oct. 1924), La Correspondance Internationale (1922-5), Clarte (1920-26). His books include Year One of the Russian Revolution (1925-28), La Ville en Danger: Petrograd, L'an II de la Revolution (Nov.-Dec. 1919), Pendant la Guerre Civil: Petrograd, mai-juin 1919 (Jan.1920), Vie des revolutionnaires (published in 1930, with a preface dated 1929, indicating the work was written earlier, perhaps in 1922)⁶², Ville Conquise, the novel about the Civil War and Red Terror, written in 1930-31 and published in English as Conquered City, 1967, as well as the aforementioned Les Anarchistes et l'experience de la Revolution russe.

Serge's writings reveal his public priorities as he saw them at the time: 1) This is the first socialist revolution, and revolutionaries must be within it; 2) the White terror threatens to destroy the revolution, so revolutionaries must defend it; 3) Look what happened in Finland: the workers thought they could have a peaceful transition to socialism and were drowned in

⁶¹See his letter to Anton Ciliga in New International, Feb. 1939, p. 54.

⁶²Richard Greeman, op. cit., p. 219n.

blood by the Whites; 4) The Cheka, instrument of Red terror, the Bolsheviks' worst creation, nevertheless was formed as a response to the terror of the Whites and the enemies from within the revolution, demonstrated by attempts to assassinate Lenin and Trotsky.

Although Serge was in this period a convinced Bolshevik, he was by no means uncritical. His writings were forceful examinations of the negative aspects of the revolution of which the Communists were only too painfully aware. Serge concentrated on these aspects, as we shall see, in order better to analyze and understand; no attempt was made to idealize the shortcomings of the revolution or the Bolsheviks even while the conclusions he drew of both were positive.

The following examination of Serge's civil war writings is selective, dealing with the major issues Serge took positions on, leading to the development of his (emerging) critique of the Soviet Union. The examination does not proceed text by text, but rather by looking at certain selected issues taken up by the Bolsheviks. Thus: the treaty of Brest-Litovsk controversy and consequences, the White massacre in Finland as result, the Civil War and role of Trotsky, Lenin, and Stalin (where he was offended); analysis of War Communism, opposition to it (Workers Opposition) and the subsequent disaster for the revolution in the revolt of Kronstadt sailors; totalitarianism emergent, role of petty bourgeoisie in formation of bureaucracy; NEP.

When Serge undertook the writing of a history of the Revolution, he began with the first year. This is not an eyewitness account, and differs considerably from his eyewitness, participatory accounts of the Civil War. The latter works, witnessed and experienced are much more impressionistic, anecdotal and evocative. Year One of the Russian Revolution, on the other hand, deals with events that took place before Serge arrived on Russian soil. It is a revolutionary history which is both partisan and uncompromising, revealing the limited choices facing the Bolsheviks in each new situation.

His sources were official documents, speeches, memoirs, notes, reports, and fragmentary studies.⁶³ In this work as in his others, Serge was writing to correct the record, and to draw lessons for revolutionaries. The book, pretending no 'objectivity,' expresses "no other point of view but that held by the proletarian revolutionaries,"⁶⁴ but does strive to stick to the facts.

In trying to resurrect the early history of Bolshevism, then, and to distinguish it from what followed, Serge turned to the early Bolshevik controversies, beginning with the insurrection itself, the role of the urban middle classes, the Constituent Assembly and the first flames of the Civil War, and the division within the Bolshevik Party over the accord with Germany, the treaty of Brest-Litovsk.

On the revolution, Serge declared himself with Lenin and Trotsky and against the opposers (including Zinoviev, Kamenev, and Stalin) within the Bolsheviks. Serge compared Lenin's "On the Road to Insurrection" with Marx's "The Communist Manifesto." He also affirmed that Trotsky was in complete accord with Lenin and they were both correct on the timing of the insurrection.⁶⁵

Serge destroyed the notion of the Bolshevik coup d'etat, by concentrating on the role of the "party of the proletariat" which "expresses at a conscious level, what the masses want and carry it out."⁶⁶ He repeated Lenin's and the Bolshevik's conception of the party as "the nervous system of the working class," "its brain," which "reveals what they [the working

⁶³Serge, Year One of the Russian Revolution, Author's foreword, p. 19.

⁶⁴Victor Serge, from the Foreward, Year One of the Russian Revolution, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, New York, 1972, p. 18. First published as L'An I de la revolution russe, Paris, 1930.

⁶⁵Year One, p. 380n and p. 67.

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 56.

class] have been thinking."⁶⁷ The Party is the majority party of the working class "It is all one multitude." Serge also said the Party in 1917 suffered not the slightest bureaucratic deformation; its dominant tradition was against opportunism.⁶⁸

Serge's view of the revolution was repeated in his 1920 article "La Revolution d'Octobre a Moscou,"⁶⁹ in his biography of Lenin, Lenine 1917, (1925) in From Lenin to Stalin, (1936) and his article "Trente Ans apres la Revolution russe" (1947) and other works. The revolution was a genuine expression of mass sentiment and action by the overwhelming majority of workers and peasants, and "the Bolshevik Party was the political organization which best expressed the popular sentiment. From this fact came its popularity and the effectiveness of its activity."⁷⁰ Moreover, the superior capabilities of Lenin, the "most hated and the most loved man on earth"⁷¹ were of supreme importance. His genius, Serge wrote, lay in his being a consistent revolutionist in times of revolution.⁷² Trotsky,

⁶⁷Ibid., pp. 56-61.

⁶⁸Serge noted in From Lenin to Stalin, "the party discussed, tendencies appeared and disappeared, and opposition elements, which must not be confused with counter-revolutionists, agitated unceasingly in broad daylight during the whole civil war -- until 1921. They were not to disappear completely until 1925-1926, when in consequence all internal life disappeared from the Party. ... Men fought and died for a new kind of freedom." pp. 22-23.

⁶⁹Bulletin Communiste, Vol. II, Nos. 36-37 (Double issue), pp. 612-620.

⁷⁰Serge, From Lenin to Stalin, Monad/Pathfinder Press, New York, p. 23.

⁷¹Serge, From Lenin to Stalin, (FLTS) p. 15.

⁷²See Serge's biography of Lenin, Lenine, 1917, Paris, 1925.

whom Serge calls "the second head of the revolution" was also indispensable to its realization.⁷³

Elsewhere, Serge again put to rest the idea of the revolution as the work of a small minority of conspirators. Urging 'people' to read the words of eye-witnesses such as John Reed and Jacques Sadoul, Serge asserts "The Bolshevik 'conspiracy' was literally carried into power by a colossal and rising wave of public sentiment."⁷⁴

Serge's basic attitudes were the same as Lenin's and Trotsky's on the early tasks and decisions facing the Bolsheviks. If anything, Serge criticized the Bolsheviks for their leniency in treating their White enemies, citing instance where White officers were allowed to get away instead of being shot on the spot, calling this lack of firmness "foolish clemency." Serge adds, "the greatest humanity lies in the utmost rigour: magnanimity costs too much."⁷⁵

Serge conformed completely with his newly acquired Bolshevism, praising the "party patriotism" of the Bolsheviks, a patriotism of "inestimable value in the class war, a patriotism of class and party: better to be wrong with the party of the proletariat than right against it. There is no greater revolutionary wisdom than this."⁷⁶ By 1928, Serge had

⁷³Serge described Trotsky's role in From Lenin to Stalin, pp. 16-19. Serge also drew a portrait of the two leaders of the revolution, nameless but instantly recognizable, in his Civil War novel, Conquered City, written in 1930-31, published in Paris in 1932. In From Lenin to Stalin, Serge quoted from his portrait of the two, explaining that although he wrote it in 1919 (to be incorporated into his novel 11 years later) he was in Leningrad when writing the novel: if he had used the names in 1930 "the Black Chamber would not have passed my manuscript." p. 22n.

⁷⁴Serge, "Trente Ans apres la Revolution russe," pp. 3-4.

⁷⁵Serge, Year One, p. 88 and 381n.

⁷⁶Ibid, p. 100.

completely reversed his position: the Opposition, he said, was defeated by "party patriotism." ...

"the Party that was excommunicating, imprisoning, and beginning to murder us, remained our Party, and we still owed everything to it; we must live only for it since only through it could we serve the Revolution. We were defeated by Party patriotism: it both provoked us to rebel and turned us against ourselves."⁷⁷

Although the earlier quote shows the fervor of Serge's new-found loyalty to the Party which made the revolution possible, the latter shows his ability to remain critical was never compromised by this allegiance. This was not to be the case for many others who had been Party members for most of their political life.

Another seeming contradiction emerges between Serge's frank portrayal of the besieged revolution in 1918, when the question of 'liberty' fell victim to the "avalanche of all the other problems which were descending with inexorable force upon the young Republic and threatening to engulf it completely,"⁷⁸ and Serge's preoccupation at the end of his life when he wrote that "the only problem which revolutionary Russia, in all the years from 1917 to 1923, utterly failed to consider was the problem of liberty."⁷⁹ As Serge clearly demonstrated, the revolution was hemmed in from all sides: from within, the anarchists⁸⁰, SR's, Mensheviks and Kadets all opposed the Bolsheviks and formed part

⁷⁷Serge, Memoirs, p. 245.

⁷⁸Tamara Deutscher, book review of Year One of the Russian Revolution, in Critique 1, Spring 1973, p. 95.

⁷⁹Serge, Memoirs, p. 349. Tamara Deutscher also points out this contradiction in her review of Serge's book which appeared in Critique 1. She answers Serge with Serge: "Serge's own truthful and despairing narrative provides all the evidence that in the 'Year One' there was no chance, no possibility to translate into practice his -- and the Bolsheviks -- high aspirations and hopes." Critique 1, p. 95.

⁸⁰Makhno's Black Guard fought the Whites while opposing the Bolsheviks.

of the counter-revolution; famine and epidemic took hold; from without, the White armies of Kolchak, Denikin, Yudenich and later Wrangel were joined by the armies of fourteen capitalist powers⁸¹ to blockade and strangle the revolution. With all these forces determined to destroy the Bolsheviks, the miracle is that they survived at all. Serge attributed their victory to the superior skill and energy of Trotsky as Commissar of War, to Lenin, whose genius lay in his ability to express the unspoken aspirations of the man in the street,⁸² and to the thousands of revolutionary fighters who were in the forefront of an immense popular movement.⁸³

As for liberty, Serge demonstrated in numerous examples that the measures taken were necessary and still were too lenient. His position throughout was that of a consistent revolutionary giving a candid account of the chain of events in the Revolution, Civil War and attempted counter-revolution which led to many of the sacred principles upon which the revolution was founded -- among them, workers control and workers democracy -- being curtailed by force of circumstance. Later Serge would theorize on which of the measures taken out of necessity were transformed into permanent features of the new society; but during Year One, Serge agreed with the direction of Bolshevik

⁸¹ Leon Trotsky, Between Red and White: Social Democracy and the Wars of Intervention in Russia, 1918-1921, New Park Publications, 1975. First published in 1922 as Mezhdu Imperializmom i Revolyutsiei, Moscow.

⁸² FTLS, p. 15.

⁸³ Serge, "Trente Ans Apres La Revolution Russe," p. 6. There is a large body of literature which takes issue with Serge on this point, attributing the victory of the Bolsheviks not to their popularity, but to lesser evilism: the peasants preferred the Soviets to any of the available alternatives. Schapiro also attributes the White's defeat to the less than whole-hearted support the Allies gave to the White armies. See for example Leonard Schapiro, The Russian Revolutions of 1917: The Origins of Modern Communism, Basic Books, 1984, pps. 176-184.

policy. We will now turn to examine a few of the events forcing the Bolsheviks to apparently retreat on matters of principle.

Industry: workers control or blanket nationalization?

Notwithstanding the life-threatening difficulties facing the revolution from the very beginning, the early history was one of a developing socialist democracy. Both Daniel's The Conscience of the Revolution, and Central Committee minutes of the Bolshevik Party from August 1917-February 1918⁸⁴ attest to the lively atmosphere of free-wheeling and intense debate which went on within the Bolshevik Party and between the various Parties in the early months.

On the question of industry, the Bolsheviks at first favored workers control over industry rather than blanket nationalization of the means of production, and State planning and centralization at the expense of local initiatives. Lenin, following Marx and Engels,⁸⁵ envisaged a rather long period of co-existence with the capitalists; the question of workers hegemony was the key. Serge concurred with Lenin and his co-thinkers, seeing effective workers control rather than total nationalization of industry as being organized in "mixed trusts" with the "growing participation of the socialist state ... in which the capitalists would retain some place."⁸⁶ This economic

⁸⁴Reproduced in English in the Pluto Press volume The Bolsheviks and the October Revolution, London 1974, and in part in R.V. Daniel's A Documentary History of Communism, Volume 1, University Press of New England, 1984.

⁸⁵See Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, The Communist Manifesto.

⁸⁶FLTS, p. 30. This conception of forms of the market surviving after the revolution are relevant to the debates on "market socialism" today which are current in Soviet style economies from the Soviet Union, East Europe and China to Cuba and Nicaragua. The problem is not whether a form of the market is possible or desirable, but under what kind of political and social control. In a workers state, where there is genuine
(continued...)

gradualism was called "state capitalism" by Lenin and was based on the Bolshevik conviction that socialism was impossible in such a backward setting, but that a gradually socializing Russia would be an example for the European working class.⁸⁷

Serge agreed with Lenin here as elsewhere: showing how the Bolsheviks usually endorsed the initiatives already taken by the masses (as in the decree of November 14 which invited the workers to "use their own committees to control the production, accounting and financing" of the firms they work in⁸⁸), Serge pointed out the key to the question of industry was the hegemony of the proletariat. He worried that the technical intelligentsia, so necessary to the organization of production, if not controlled by the workers, would simply administer the society and could revert to exploiting labor.⁸⁹ The discussion

⁸⁶(...continued)

workers control, a surviving market does not threaten to reestablish generalized exploitation of labor. It is a feature of the transition period that is not permanent. The question of workers control is vital in this context. That was how the Bolsheviks saw the issue in 1917-1918, and is precisely what is missing from these debates today.

⁸⁷Once the Western European proletariat seized power in the more advanced capitalist countries, their vast resources would be at the disposal of the Russian revolution. In this case, true 'proletarian internationalism' would translate into German socialists building factories in revolutionary Russia.

⁸⁸Year One, p. 95. The decree of Nov. 14 legalized the intervention of workers in the management of factories; the decisions of the organs of control were binding and all commercial secrets were abolished. By exercising its control, the working class would learn to direct industry. Through the nationalization of banking and credit institutions, the workers would recover, for the benefit of the State, part of the proceeds levied by capital from their labor, thus diminishing their exploitation. In this way, the class would progress towards the complete expropriation of the exploiters. Ibid., pp. 135-36.

⁸⁹Serge stated this idea incompletely in Year One, pp. 103-5, and returned to it in his unpublished essays from his exile in Mexico during and after WWII.

was terminated, in effect, by the encroaching Civil War. Nationalization was made imperative for defense.⁹⁰

Serge pointed to the irony contained in the actions of the dispossessed bourgeoisie:

"Through the civil war that they have begun, the former propertied classes lose everything. The logic of the struggle demands this. The famine necessitates rationing in the cities and requisitions in the country where, as a result, peasant uprisings break out. To an ever increasing extent, the economy must be directed with a view to war, and stringent measures of nationalization are extended to the whole of production. Factory owners ask to be nationalized, as they cannot live otherwise."⁹¹

Brest-Litovsk, Left Communists, and Socialist Democracy

As has been noted above, the early months of the revolution did resemble the "popular ferment, bubbling ideas, rivalry of clubs, parties and publications" which were so noticeably absent when Serge crossed the border from Finland in Feb. 1919. Serge's critical spirit would have met kindred souls had he been able to avoid imprisonment in France and made it to Russia in time for the first heady months.

One of what Serge called the tendentious myths of the Russian Revolution's historiography which he demolished in his

⁹⁰Nationalization went further than the Bolsheviks had intended in 1917 (Serge states that the Bolsheviks had no further plans than workers control, nationalization of banks and credit institutions and opening the books, allowing the secrets of capitalist functioning to be available to the workers [Year One, p. 136]) because the workers, like the peasants had carried out a de facto seizure of property and nationalization legalized the situation; and because the Bolsheviks thought that legal nationalization would thwart intervention by foreign governments to protect their nationals property. (See David Lane, Politics and Society in the USSR, p. 59. Further, Germans had been buying up shares in Russian industry, and as part of the provisions of the treaty of Brest-Litovsk, all expropriated factories had to be returned within one year unless they were nationalized -- hence the rush for nationalization.

⁹¹FLTS, p. 32.

retrospective on the revolution's 30th birthday was that the Bolshevik's immediate goal was to establish a monopoly on state power.⁹² Serge writes that the truth was just the opposite: the Bolsheviks were most afraid of being isolated in power. The Left Social Revolutionaries participated in the government with the Bolsheviks from November until July 1918. They refused to recognize, along with a good third of the known Bolsheviks, the terms of peace with Germany put forth in the treaty of Brest-Litovsk,, and on July 6 began an insurrectional revolt in Moscow proclaiming their intention to govern alone and to 'reopen the war against German imperialism." They were defeated and from then it was left to the Bolsheviks to rule alone. Marcel Liebman notes that at this point, "the Leninists ... against their will, concentrated the whole state power in their own hands, with no share held by other socialist parties."⁹³ And Serge commented that "as their responsibilities increased, their mentality changed."⁹⁴

This 'change of mentality' meant that the Bolsheviks moved to suppress their socialist and anarchist opponents, a move that is apparent with the benefit of hindsight to have had irreversible consequences for the further development of socialist democracy. At the time however, what was apparent was that the SR's launched a series of terrorist attacks, killing first Voludarsky, then Uritsky and attempted to kill Lenin, who later insisted that Dora Kaplan, his would-be assassin, not be executed.⁹⁵

⁹² "Trente Ans Apres La Revolution Russe," first published in Nov. 1947 in the tiny French left wing publication La Revolution Proletarienne, directed by the French syndicalist Alfred Rosmer.

⁹³ Marcel Liebman, "Was Lenin a Stalinist?", in Tariq Ali (ed) The Stalinist Legacy, Penguin Books, England, 1984, p. 140.

⁹⁴ Serge, "Trente Ans Apres La Revolution Russe" p. .

⁹⁵ Serge, FLTS, p. 31.

The SR's weren't the only early critics from within the revolution: arguing against the 'peace of shame,'⁹⁶ Preobrazhensky and Bukharin, later to stand on opposite sides of the industrialization debates, joined with others to put out the "Theses of Left Communists" in 1918. Although the debate began on the question of war or peace, it turned to industrial policy. The Left Communists warned against the growing bureaucratization of industry which would divorce the proletariat from control over economic and political life and force the regime increasingly to rely on bourgeois specialists and capitalist methods of labor organization, such as piece-work, one-man management and Taylorism.⁹⁷

The debates over the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk show Bolshevism at its best; democratic, principled and yet maintaining a balance between flexibility and firmness. Serge calls the period "The Great Years." The debates were passionate and committed. The minutes of the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party show how deeply divided the Bolsheviks were on nearly every major issue -- with members lining up on different sides of every question, threatening resignation on questions of principle, only to line up differently on subsequent questions.⁹⁸ The debate with the other socialist parties at this juncture were equally lively and creative.

⁹⁶As the Peace of Brest-Litovsk was called by many Bolsheviks, including Serge.

⁹⁷See "Theses of the Left Communists (1918)" published in the first number of the Moscow produced journal Kommunist on 20 April 1918, translated and published by Critique in 1977. Half of the "Theses" are translated in Daniels collection, A Documentary History of Communism, Vol. 1, pp. 98-102.

⁹⁸See The Bolsheviks and the October Revolution: Central Committee Minutes of the Russian Social-Democratic Labour party (Bolsheviks) August 1917-February 1918, Pluto Press, London, 1974. The minutes pertaining to the Brest-Litovsk terms of peace, in particular, show how deep the divisions in the Bolsheviks were. Reading this volume is quite a corrective to the notion of Bolshevik monolithism in the early period.

Although Serge was not in Russia to take part in this debate, he devoted a chapter to it in his Year One. Serge sided with Lenin's realistic approach to the negotiations, because they were based on hard facts, not left sentiments. It was impossible to conduct a revolutionary war against imperialism -- the old army didn't exist, and the new one was just forming. Serge says "the phrases with which the Lefts were so lavish expressed pure sentiment. The reasoning they invoked was simply pitiful."⁹⁹ Moreover, Serge finds Lenin's realism even "more impressive in that he displays no basic tendency to overestimate the forces of the enemy."¹⁰⁰ Serge had points of agreement with Trotsky in this controversy as well, acknowledging that Trotsky's wanting to hold out gave strength to the Western proletariat, who saw a separate peace as a capitulation to German imperialism and prolonging the war¹⁰¹. Serge's overall agreement was with Lenin, however,¹⁰² on the need for surrender; yet from the vantage point of 1928,¹⁰³ Serge reflected that the weakness of German imperialism at that time would have prevented it from destroying the Russian revolution -- saying that even a

⁹⁹Serge, Year One, p. 169.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., p. 172.

¹⁰¹E.H. Carr suggests that the differences between Lenin and Trotsky on Brest-Litovsk were concerned with emphasis: "In the Brest-Litovsk controversy, though Trotsky was the most eloquent and ingenious advocate of world revolution, he was also the champion of the policy of playing off one group of capitalists against the other; he was at the opposite pole to those who stood on the ground of pure revolutionary principle unsullied by compromise or expediency ... On the other hand, Lenin, while insisting on the needs of national defence, was so far from abandoning world revolution that he constantly stressed it as the supreme goal of his policy." See E. H. Carr, The Bolshevik Revolution 1917-1923, Vol. 3, London, MacMillan, 1953, pp. 55-56.

¹⁰²Trotsky came to side with Lenin as well.

¹⁰³Serge was writing Year One in the years 1928-1930.

German occupation would not have meant the collapse of the Soviet regime.¹⁰⁴

Serge sided with Lenin after carefully examining the position of all the opposing tendencies inside and outside of the Party. Although he sympathized with the anti-bureaucratic stance of the Left Communists, he did not agree with them on the question of the peace treaty.¹⁰⁵ The Bolsheviks were forced into accepting the terms of the peace by the advancing German front. Proletarian realism demanded recognition of this fact, not adherence to abstract, romantic or dogmatic conceptions. "Revolutionary honour," Serge wrote, "is not put in question

¹⁰⁴Year One, pp. 172-3. Upon reflection, Serge appreciated better Trotsky's line at the time, which was to exhaust all revolutionary possibilities and to convince the proletariat of the West of the intransigence of the Bolsheviks before Austro-German imperialism. Trotsky's tactic helped dissipate the attitude shared by many in the West that the Russians' surrender made them responsible for prolonging a hated war.

¹⁰⁵Serge examined the Left Communist economic policies and Lenin's response in Year One. Here one would expect, given Serge's previous and subsequent political development, to find a larger measure of sympathy for the positions of the Lefts than Serge actually demonstrates. Instead Serge criticized the Left Communists for their emotionalism and zeal, and their lack of a grasp of the real and desperate state of the revolution -- what Serge described as the country "at its last gasp." Lenin had grasped the real situation, and was not trapped by any 'revolutionary subjectivism to which intellectuals of middle-class origins are prone' according to Serge, echoing Lenin and using his phraseology. (Year One, p. 224) His (Lenin's) industrial policies, seen in this regard, were a step forward, because they would lead to industry being organized and administered, and not to its falling further behind. State capitalism, then, Serge argued, quoting Lenin, was a step in the direction of socialism. (Ibid. 220) Clearly the situation was drastic and demanded far-sighted and rational policies; Serge decided Lenin possessed the clarity and foresight necessary. Serge also wrote that Lenin's handling of the Left Communists was a model of revolutionary politics, and saved the Bolshevik Party from suffering a split. Ibid., pp. 220-226.

when, without abandoning the struggle, one submits to an unavoidable defeat."¹⁰⁶

Although the terms of the peace were disastrous -- revolutionary Russia lost Poland and the Baltic regions, huge tracts of the Ukraine, 27% of her own sown area, 26% of her population, a third of her average crops, three-quarters of her iron and steel and 26% of her railway network¹⁰⁷ -- Serge weighed the pluses as well as the minuses. One of the pluses was that the conduct of the discussion showed the health of the party which was able to strike a perfect balance between authority and democracy, discipline and lenience; the minuses were described forcefully by Serge, particularly his description of the sacrifice of the Finnish Revolution, which was drowned in blood in 1918. Serge has the almost singular merit among historians of the revolution of not letting the tragic events in Finland get lost in the history of the Russian revolution.

Finland

Serge had passed through Finland on his way to Petrograd in January 1919. His description is worth quoting in full:

Finland received us as foes, for the White Terror was only just over. The cold air was heavy with chilled violence. Without ever leaving the train, we crossed this huge land of sleepy woods, snow-covered lakes, tracts of whiteness, and pretty painted cottages lost in the wilderness. We went through towns so tidy and silent that they reminded us of children's toys. We had a moment of panic when, as evening fell, the train stopped in a clearing and soldiers lined up alongside the tracks: we were invited to get down. The women murmured, 'They're going to shoot us.' We refused to leave the train,

¹⁰⁶Year One, p. 175.

¹⁰⁷Schapiro, The Russian Revolutions of 1917, p. 170. Serge's figures, which he got from Karl Radek's report to the First All-Russian Congress of Economic Councils, give an even larger picture of the 'burden of Brest-Litovsk': The Soviet Republic, he wrote, lost 40% of its industrial proletariat, 45% of its fuel production, 90% of its sugar production, 64%-70% of its metal industry; 55% of its wheat. Year One, p. 199.

but it was only to give us a breath of air while we waited for the carriages to be cleaned and the engine to be fuelled with wood. The sentries ignored their instructions [they were ordered to shoot at the first attempt of anyone to leave the train] and started to be pleasant to the children.¹⁰⁸

The trip through Finland was also recounted in Serge's novel Birth of Our Power, where Serge saw in the hostile eyes of the Finnish guards the bitter defeat of the Finnish workers. What had happened?

The treaty of Brest-Litovsk had sealed the sacrifice of the Finnish proletariat, in whom the Russian revolutionaries had rightly placed great hopes.¹⁰⁹ Finland was an advanced bourgeois democracy, with a well organized labor movement. Constituted as a Grand Duchy, it had been a largely autonomous part of the Russian empire since 1809. The Finnish bourgeoisie was determined to use WWI to gain independence. After the successful October Revolution in Russia, the Finns pressed their claim on the Soviet government, citing the Bolshevik principle of self-determination of nations which included the right of secession. On December 18/31 1917,¹¹⁰ the resolution recognizing national independence of Finland was adopted by the Sovnarkom (Council of People's Commissars). But this independence gave freedom not to the Finnish workers but the bourgeoisie.¹¹¹ The Finnish social democrats, "found themselves in the position of having to receive freedom not

¹⁰⁸ Serge, Memoirs, p. 68.

¹⁰⁹ Serge, Year One, p. 182. Lenin had written, in his "Third Letter from Afar," before returning to Russia, that "the Finnish workers are better organizers than us and will help us in this field; in their own fashion they will form a vanguard pressing towards a foundation of the Socialist Republic."

¹¹⁰ December 18 (Old Style), December 31 (New Style) calendar.

¹¹¹ E. H. Carr, The Bolshevik Revolution, 1917-1923, Vol. 1, pp. 287-289.

directly from the hands of socialists, but with the aid of the Finnish bourgeoisie."¹¹²

The Finnish social democrats, formed in the mould of the German social democrats, and labeled cowardly and indecisive by Stalin during the discussion of Finnish independence at the VTsIK (Central Committee) quoted above, had gained a majority in the Finnish Parliamentary elections of 1916. They voted in the eight-hour day and other social legislation. The question presented itself almost immediately: could socialism be achieved through the ballot box?

Tensions mounted, and a general strike was proclaimed on November 14/27 1917, provoked by a serious famine. The strike took place just weeks after the successful October revolution in Russia, just miles from its frontier.¹¹³ Bloody clashes ensued between reds and whites. Serge called it a revolution aborted. He blamed the Finnish social democratic leaders, who could easily have taken power but were indecisive. O.W. Kuusinen, one of the principal leaders of Finnish Social Democracy later wrote: "wishing not to risk our democratic conquests, and hoping to manoeuvre round this turning-point of history by our parliamentary skill, we decided to evade the revolution..."¹¹⁴

The situation continued to escalate, and in January, it became clear that the parliamentary solution had come to a dead

¹¹²Stalin, Sochineniya, iv, 22-24, quoted in Carr, Ibid., p.288.

¹¹³At the Finnish Social-Democratic Congress in November, Stalin, representing the Council of Commissars, appealed to the Finnish comrades to seize power, and promised them the fraternal assistance of the Russian proletariat. The Social-Democrats did make a bid for power, but the promised aid was not forthcoming because of the provisions of Brest-Litovsk. See E. H. Carr, op. cit., and Boris Souvarine, Stalin, p. 100.

¹¹⁴Quoted in Serge, Year One, p. 184. The passage is striking for its similarity to the situation in Chile 1970-1973, when the Popular Unity Coalition came to governmental power and attempted a parliamentary road to socialism.

end. The Finnish social democrats attempted to seize power: they introduced workers control over industry, and debated whether it was now possible to "establish, without the expropriation of the rich or the dictatorship of labour, a parliamentary democracy in which the proletariat would have been the leading class."¹¹⁵ The 'Finnish commune' lasted but a few months, but passed revolutionary legislation and attempted in Serge's words, "a workers' revolution conducted in the name of an ideal democracy." They were rapidly defeated by the 'greater realism of the bourgeoisie' and General Mannerheim's troops,¹¹⁶ beefed up by a brigade of Swedish volunteers and the German Schutzkorps. The White Terror followed. Soviet troops had to retire under the provisions of Brest-Litovsk, giving a whole new perspective to the consequences of that 'shameful treaty'. Helsinki was captured after Mannerheim's troops organized a massacre whose main victims were women and children. The bloodbath in Finland, which Serge said had only been matched by the massacre at the Paris Commune, ended up killing one in four Finnish workers. It has since been matched by the equally bloody ending to the Chilean working class' experiment with the peaceful transition to socialism (1970-1973) -- an experiment strikingly similar to the shortlived "People's Republic of Finland."

Serge drew theoretical conclusions from the White terror in Finland, which he said could not be

"explained by the frenzy of battle ... the psychosis of civil war plays a purely secondary role.... The terror is in reality the result of a calculation and a historical necessity. The victorious propertied classes are perfectly aware that they can only ensure their own domination in the aftermath of a social

¹¹⁵ Serge, Ibid.

¹¹⁶ General Mannerheim, of Swedish origin, was a former general of the Russian army. One of Helsinki's main thoroughfare's is named after this butcher of the Finnish working class.

battle by inflicting on the working class a bloodbath savage enough to enfeeble it for tens of years afterwards. And since the class in question is far more numerous than the wealthy classes, the number of victims must be very great.

The total extermination of all the advanced and conscious elements of the proletariat is in short, the rational objective of the White terror. In this sense, a vanquished revolution -- regardless of its tendency -- will always cost the proletariat far more than a victorious revolution, no matter what sacrifices and rigours the latter may demand."¹¹⁷

Serge made a final observation: the butcheries in Finland took place in April 1918. The Russian revolution had, up till that moment, been very lenient towards its enemies, and had not used terror. "The victorious bourgeoisie of a small nation which ranks among the most enlightened societies of Europe" had reminded the Russian proletariat of the "first law of social war."¹¹⁸

Thus the defeat of the Finnish proletariat had multiple connections to and consequences for the Russian revolution:

(1) the extension of the Russian revolution to an advanced Western capitalist country had been crushed; (2) the Bolsheviks' hands were tied by the terms of the treaty of Brest Litovsk so that they could not come to the aid of their Finnish brothers; (3) the savagery of the bourgeois response was a lesson to the Western proletariat, demonstrating the high social cost for failed revolution; (4) the ferocity of the Finnish bloodbath forced the Bolsheviks to abandon clemency and meet white terror with red; (5) the Finnish defeat was also the harbinger of successive defeats in Central Europe: Germany, Hungary, and Poland, and as a consequence occasioned the turn eastward in the Bolshevik quest for the extension of the Russian revolution, the

¹¹⁷ Serge quoted a group of Finnish Communists who wrote that 'all organized workers have either been shot or imprisoned.' Year One, p. 190.

¹¹⁸ Serge's discussion on the events in Finland can be found in Year One, pp. 182-191.

convening the Congress of the Oppressed Nationalities and Toilers of the East in Baku.¹¹⁹ Similar events brought home the lessons of Finland; in Ukraine, in the failed Bavarian, Baku and Hungarian communes.

Serge's treatment of the Finnish defeat is an extraordinary account for revolutionaries mentioned in precious few other histories.¹²⁰ Serge had seen the results of the White terror firsthand, when he crossed from Finland in January 1919 and read the price of defeat of the Finnish proletariat in the faces of the guards escorting them across the border.¹²¹

1.7. Civil War: Cheka, Terror, and Revolutionary Repression

Although cognizant of the need to match terror with terror, Serge nevertheless was critical and fearful of its use. The Civil War was full of horrors which Serge makes no attempt to hide, or idealize. His writings do make the case for understanding, however, what the stakes were: defeat of the revolution would have brought greater bloodshed and a reactionary dictatorship. The victory was a victory for the world, for culture, for humanity.¹²²

Serge wrote in his Portrait of Staline (1939) that the gravest error committed by the Bolsheviki was the establishment

¹¹⁹Aimed at India and China, the Congress was more anti-imperialist than socialist, and laid some of the seeds which were later sown in the debacle of the Chinese revolution of 1927 -- due to Stalin's Comintern policies. See Memoirs, p. 107-9, and the review by Michael Cox in Critique 1 of The First Congress of the Toilers of the East documents, pp. 101-102.

¹²⁰Serge also wrote an article in Clarte on the Finnish experience: "Une Grande Experience oubliee: La Commune finlandaise de 1918," Clarte, Vol. 1926-27, pp. 237-241.

¹²¹Described in Serge, Birth of Our Power.

¹²²All his writings on the Civil War are similar, a point concurred by Greeman, op.cit. p. 234.

of the Cheka, (Extraordinary Commission for the Repression of Counter-Revolution, Speculation, Espionage and Desertion),¹²³ the security force formed to protect the revolution from counter-revolutionaries. He called it an inquisition. The Cheka judged the accused and mere suspects without hearing or seeing them, so there was no possibility of their defending themselves. Arrests and executions were determined and carried out in secret. In later years this preoccupied Serge enormously, writing about the significance of the Cheka's creation and what it turned into -- in almost identical terms -- in his Portrait de Staline (1939), Memoirs of a Revolutionary (1942-43), and "Trente Ans Apres la Revolution russe" (1947). Despite the extraordinary measures brought on by a bitter Civil War, Serge asked how socialists could forget that public trials were "the only guarantee against arbitrary and corrupt actions...."¹²⁴ Although Serge says Dzerzhinsky was "incorruptible" and a "sincere idealist" the personnel gradually selected for the Cheka had "psychological inclinations" that prepared them to tenaciously devote themselves to the task of "internal defence": suspicion, embitterment, harshness and sadism.

"Long-standing social inferiority complexes and memories of humiliations and suffering in the Tsar's jails rendered them intractable, and since professional degeneration has rapid effects, the Chekas inevitably consisted of perverted men tending

¹²³The Cheka was originally created at the suggestion of Dzerzhinsky as an administrative organ with limited powers of investigation of cases. It was subordinated to the Sovnarkom. A decree of 5 September 1918 conferred sweeping powers on the Cheka, which it never in practice lost. This extension of power became known as the "Red Terror." By the end of 1922 it was estimated that the Cheka had imprisoned approximately 60,000; the Cheka was also responsible for 140,000 deaths by direct execution and a further 140,000 deaths by suppressing insurrections in the same four years. The figures were arrived at by the historian G.H. Leggett, and quoted in Schapiro, op. cit., pp. 183-187.

¹²⁴Serge, Portrait de Staline, Editions Bernard Grasset, Paris, 1940, pp. 57-58.

to see conspiracy everywhere and to live in the midst of perpetual conspiracy themselves.¹²⁵

Serge insists that Dzerzhinsky "judged them to be 'half-rotten' and saw no solution to the evil except in shooting the worst Chekists and abolishing the death-penalty as quickly as possible."¹²⁶

Serge did try to demonstrate the extenuating circumstances for this unpardonable terror, to be fair to Lenin's Central Committee. The Party knew they would be massacred in the event of defeat, and defeat was a real possibility. The previous experiences Serge cited, from the Paris Commune to the Finnish White Terror were evidence enough that defeats were characterized by the "mass extermination of the vanquished proletarians." Moreover, the Cheka had innocent beginnings and only changed after counter-revolutionary uprisings, the assassinations of Volodarski and Uritsky and the attempts on Lenin.¹²⁷ Nevertheless Serge would say later in his life that the Bolshevik revolution died a self-inflicted death with the creation of the Cheka, instrument of Red Terror, forerunner of

¹²⁵Serge, Memoirs, p. 80.

¹²⁶Ibid., p. 81. The death penalty was abolished, at the recommendation of Dzerzhinsky with the approval of Lenin and Trotsky, by the decree of January 17, 1920. Serge recounts that he was told that the night the Petrograd newspapers were printing the decree, the Petrograd Chekas were liquidating their stock! In Petrograd and Moscow, that night, as many as 500 suspects were shot. The Chekists responsible later justified their horrendous massacre with "if the People's Commissars were getting converted to humanitarianism, that was their business. Our business was to crush the counter-revolution forever, and they could shoot us afterwards if they felt like it!" Memoirs, pp. 98-99. The epilogue to this affair is that the death penalty was reintroduced after the Polish invasion in the spring of 1920.

¹²⁷Serge, "Trente Ans Apres la Revolution russe," p. 11 (of photocopied article from Serge archives, Mexico.)

the GPU, which exterminated the entire revolutionary generation of Bolsheviks.¹²⁸

But in 1919-1921, Serge was not publicly critical of the Cheka. In the conditions of Civil War, it appeared a tragic necessity. Privately, Serge interceded frequently on behalf of its victims, but his writings of the period contain no public condemnation.¹²⁹ Serge in fact made the case for the need for repression given the opportunism of "petty-bourgeois individualism ... unleashed in chaotic struggles.... The Cheka was no less indispensable than the Red Army and the Commissariat for Supplies.¹³⁰

The question which has perplexed Serge scholars and historians of revolution is the one of revolutionary repression: how to control it, when to end it, how to return to democratic practices. The reservations which Serge frequently expressed in his later works and in his polemic with Trotsky were not aired in his discussion of the problem of revolutionary repression (What Everyone Should Know About State Repression) in 1925, written for a French readership. Sedgwick finds Serge's

¹²⁸ Thus Serge dates the beginning of the degeneration of the Russia revolution several years earlier than the more common figures of 1937-8 (great purge), 1929 (forced collectivization, liquidation of kulaks), 1927 (defeat of the Opposition), 1924 (death of Lenin and Stalin's beginning ascent through maneuvering) or 1921 (suppression of the Kronstadt rebellion, banning of factions in the Party.) Although Serge cites 1918 as the beginning, he says Thermidor was only realized in November 1927, ironically on the tenth anniversary of the October Revolution. This coincided with the defeat of the Opposition within the Party and the subsequent expulsion, arrest and deportation of its members; and the sacrificing of the Chinese proletariat for the prestige and power of Stalin. Memoirs, pp. 215-243.

¹²⁹ Later, in his dispute with Trotsky over Kronstadt, which appeared in the pages of the New International in 1938, Serge argued (as he did elsewhere) that the establishment of the Cheka was fatal for the future course of the revolution.

¹³⁰ Serge, What Everyone Should Know About State Repression, p. 62.

justification of the Cheka -- as an 'effective' instrument of repression -- crass and incredible in light of his subsequent writings. He attributes Serge's statement that the Cheka "acts along the line of historical development" in the cause of "an energetic class conscious of what it wants...." and Serge's admission that "excesses, errors and abuses" are to be limited by "the political and moral control of the most conscious vanguard of the working class."¹³¹ to be professional apologetics. Greeman also finds this work wanting.

Sedgwick traces Serge's "even more authoritarian, autocratic standpoint than that argued by the regime's orthodox defenders in the Leninist line"¹³² to his elitist leanings, which Sedgwick defines as anti-Marxist. According to Sedgwick, Serge's outlook comes from his anarcho-syndicalist past and the anti-democratic ideas of Georges Sorel. Greeman, on the other hand, attributes Serge's apologia for repression to his "Communist conformism" during this period of his life. Greeman writes that Serge's discussion of the problem of repression is largely disappointing, and lacking his customary "verve and passion." While admitting that Serge's arguments in defense of the Red Terror are familiar, and "theoretically impeccable"¹³³, they nonetheless do not "come to grips with the central problem of revolutionary repression: the need to limit and control it in order to prevent its becoming a permanent feature."¹³⁴

¹³¹Sedgwick, "The Unhappy Elitist: Victor Serge's Early Bolshevism," op.cit., pp. 150-151. He is referring to Serge's 1925 book called What Everyone Should Know About State Repression.

¹³²Sedgwick, ibid., pp. 152-3.

¹³³Greeman, Op. cit., pp. 265-268. Greeman cites Serge's contention that the Red Terror will disappear with the end of class contradictions as falling short of actual relevance.

¹³⁴Greeman, ibid.

The problem raised is very real and relevant. The key to the question in the abstract is one of workers hegemony and institutionalized democratic workers control within the proletarian dictatorship. But the Bolsheviks were faced with the erosion of democracy, the use of repression, and the growth of bureaucracy in actual, concrete circumstances. Serge could agree with early Bolshevik policy because there was a qualitative difference between the repression exercised by the proletarian dictatorship fighting for its life from the Whites (even though it crucially erred in suppressing the non-bourgeois parties of the Left Social Revolutionaries, and anarchists¹³⁵), and the crushing of the revolution from within by a one-man dictatorship (Stalin) over the one-party dictatorship over the proletarian dictatorship. Greeman correctly points out that the tragedy of the situation was that "once democracy outside the party was destroyed, it was doomed to die within it."

Serge pointed out painstakingly the events which brought the Bolsheviks to their position of monopoly of power. The opposition parties themselves went from competition with the Bolsheviks to harsh opposition to them and the revolution. Serge noted in the Memoirs that political life could not be separated from the reality of Civil War and War Communism. Discontent turned into hardened opposition, and as such, increased the regime's authoritarianism: from the Bolshevik leadership's point of view, discontent turned into enemy

¹³⁵ Here the problem expressed itself in how to keep the rival Parties and organizations from letting their differences with the Bolsheviks turn into hostility to the revolution itself. The Mensheviks were outright opponents of Soviet rule; the anarchists were divided, and the Left SRs evolved from boycott to collaboration to insurrection against the Bolsheviks. But Serge was correct to insist that no matter how bankrupt these dissidents were, they were right to demand freedom of expression and the restoration of liberty in the Soviets, (even though the Soviets were but empty shells compared to what they had been in early 1918.) Memoirs, p. 118.

activity.¹³⁶ Serge himself found the dissenters, excepting the Workers Opposition, to be politically bankrupt. The Bolsheviks were unwilling to allow counter-revolutionary opposition to exist, and increasingly, as the Civil War, famine and War Communism continued, the opposition became counter-revolutionary.

The issue of revolutionary repression and democracy cannot be discussed outside of the political and social context. Serge was correct to point out the circumstances which led to the Red Terror and its consequences for both the oppositions and the regime itself. Sedgwick's criticism of Serge is ahistorical.¹³⁷

Although Serge's private activities and later writings attest to his misgivings about Bolshevik excesses and authoritarian practices in these early years, he nevertheless remained with them because they were still superior to all the existing alternatives.¹³⁸ What were missing in the period in

¹³⁶ Memoirs, p. 118.

¹³⁷ Sedgwick also slips too easily into psychologizing, especially in trying to identify the reasons Serge became so attached to Trotsky. To Sedgwick, Serge is drawn to Trotsky's "force, intellect, zeal in communication" and not any perceptions of Trotsky as championing the "values of libertarian Socialism." Sedgwick, History Workshop, Spring 1984, p. 154. Sedgwick clearly prefers the Serge of the 30s and 40s to the early Serge of the Civil War period. But rather than seeing Serge's position evolving with the socio-political events themselves, he attributes Serge's early Bolshevism as an elitist and hence anti-working class posture derived from Serge's recent syndicalist past. Instead of quoting Serge himself to back this up, Sedgwick resorts to politics by association, quoting Serge's friend Andreu Nin, and articles written, not by Serge, in the French Vie Ouvriere to which Serge also contributed.

¹³⁸ Serge named four characteristics which gave the Bolshevik Party the edge: (a) its Marxist conviction, (b) its view of the hegemony of the proletariat in the revolutionary process, (c) its intransigent internationalism, and (d) the unity between thought and action. Serge, "Trente Ans Apres la Revolution russe," p. 8.

which political pluralism was terminated, first in the society at large, and then within the Party itself, were institutions that could guarantee that democratic freedoms, suspended for a specific time frame for specific political reasons, would later be restored. The tragedy of what actually happened is that a virtue was made of historical necessities and authoritarian anti-democratic practices were extended and institutionalized. The tragedy has turned to bitter farce as subsequent revolutions have imitated the Bolshevik experience, perversely arguing that the new autocratic policies represent some sort of higher form of political governance.¹³⁹

Serge's arguments in this period provide no satisfactory resolution to the problem of repression and the restoration of democracy. The combined effects of economic crisis, Civil War and internal counter-revolution meant that any alternative to Bolshevik dictatorship would be chaos, or worse. No democratic institutions still existed in reality; the Soviets after 1918 were merely auxiliary organs of the Party, de facto Party Committees. The Party itself had been invaded by careerist, and bureaucratic elements. For Serge, the only hope against the evil of bureaucratization and for the sometime return of democratic practices lay in "the discreet dictatorship of the old, honest, and incorruptible members ... the Old Guard"¹⁴⁰ This wishful thinking represented a static appreciation of the Old Guard, divorced from time and circumstance. Although Serge could not resolve the dilemma into which history forced the Bolsheviks, he was able to express the tragedy in literary form in his novel about the Cheka and the White terror, Conquered

¹³⁹ James Petras discusses the problem of the relationship of repression and democracy in the transition period in "Authoritarianism, Democracy and the Transition to Socialism," in Socialist Register 1986.

¹⁴⁰ Memoirs, p. 119.

City, where the bitter fruits of victory under siege are translated into a defeat of revolutionary ideals.¹⁴¹

1.8. Poland and Stalin's March on Lvov

Capital punishment was abolished in January 1920, because it seemed that the Civil War was ending. Serge later wrote that he had "the feeling that everyone in the Party expected a normalization of the regime, the ending of the state of siege, a return to Soviet democracy and the limitation of the powers of the Cheka, if not its abolition."¹⁴² Although the country was exhausted, there were still great reserves of "faith and enthusiasm." Serge saw the fatal moment for the future of the revolution in the summer of 1920, when Pilsudski's Polish army invaded the Ukraine. Pilsudski's aggression against the revolution coincided with France and Britain recognizing General Baron Wrangel, who was entrenched in the Crimea with the remnants of Denikin's army.

Pilsudski was turned back at Kiev, but Lenin and the Central Committee took the opportunity to try to provoke a Soviet revolution in Poland. They undertook a march on Warsaw, which they imagined would be victorious, thereby creating an ally and scrapping the Treaty of Versailles. Lenin, with information more than a year out of date, believed the Polish

¹⁴¹Richard Greeman, in his foreword to the English translation of the novel, says Serge answered the difficult question presented by the need for revolutionary repression in the form of this tragic novel, which poses the irony of victory in defeat and defeat in victory. Conquered City, Writers and Readers Cooperative, 1978, pp. xiv-xv.

¹⁴²Serge, "Trente Ans Apres la Revolution russe," p. 12. Deutscher confirms that Trotsky also looked forward to the curtailment of the powers of the Cheka and the abolition of the death penalty as steps in the direction of an domestic truce which would allow the parties of at least the socialist opposition to resume open activity. These hopes were overshadowed by the "horrors of war" which "had not yet receded into the past. Isaac Deutscher, The Prophet Armed, Trotsky: 1879-1921, Oxford University Press, 1970, p. 447.

workers and peasants would greet the invaders as liberators.¹⁴³ To the Bolsheviks, Poland represented the bridge between Russia and Germany -- where revolutionary ferment was still kindling after defeat. Tukhachevsky's army was sent to Warsaw. Serge described Lenin, in high spirits, pointing to a map of the Polish front while discussing the progress of Tukhachevsky's march, at the Comintern's Second Congress. His speeches, Serge recalled, were "confident of victory."¹⁴⁴

Trotsky had serious misgivings of the risks involved in the venture, and Tukhachevsky complained of his troops' exhaustion. Stalin, who at Tsaritsyn had carried out his own version of revolutionary terror and intrigue against Trotsky¹⁴⁵, was ordered to provide support to Tukhachevsky. Instead, Stalin, Budyenny, and Voroshilov decided to march on Lvov (Lemberg) to assure themselves of a personal victory. Stalin was defeated at Lvov, and never forgot the people who criticized his actions there: Tukhachevsky and Trotsky (who criticized his methods at Tsaritsyn.)

The Red Army was defeated at the gates of Warsaw when the Polish workers and peasants failed to rise. Serge conjectured that the defeat at Warsaw would probably not have come had

¹⁴³Deutscher, op. cit., p. 465.

¹⁴⁴Memoirs, p. 108.

¹⁴⁵Serge described Stalin's intrigues at Tsaritsyn against both Trotsky and the repression against the anarchists and SRs there in his Portrait de Staline, pp. 49-56. Stalin's exploits are also discussed by Souvarine in Stalin, pp. 222-253, by Trotsky in My Life, and by Deutscher in his biography Stalin. Stalin, jealous of Trotsky's successes in the Civil War, supported the opposition to Trotsky's use of conscription, discipline and old military specialists in the Red army. The nucleus of this opposition was at Voroshilov's HQ at Tsaritsyn. Stalin's opportunistic support of the opposition's democratic concerns for the Army did not extend to his administration of Tsaritsyn, where he organized the local Cheka, and instituted inexorable repression, discovered numerable "plots" and resolved all doubts about suspected conspiracies with the simple order to shoot any suspects. Souvarine and Serge, op.cit.

Stalin followed orders to provide support to Tukhachevsky.¹⁴⁶ Had it won, the Red Army would have acted as a substitute for the Polish working class, and a dictatorship of the proletariat would have been established without the participation of the Polish proletariat. Practicing revolution by conquest was certainly contrary to Marxist principles, though it was the product of the Bolsheviks' fear of being isolated in the world; the rout at Warsaw had been a desperate attempt to break out of their isolation. Serge drew the lesson: "revolution cannot be brought into a foreign country at the point of a gun. Pilsudski,...wins the battle of Warsaw. Russia loses a common border with Germany, and Germany loses its chance of revolution."¹⁴⁷ And in the Memoirs, Serge concluded: "This point marked a kind of boundary for us. The failure of the attack on Warsaw meant the defeat of the Russian Revolution in Central Europe... Once more the westward expansion of the revolution had failed. There was no alternative for the Bolsheviks but to turn east. Hastily, the Congress of the Oppressed Nationalities of the East was convened at Baku."¹⁴⁸

It was at this point that Serge "began to feel...this sense of danger from inside, a danger within ourselves, in the very temper and character of victorious Bolshevism."¹⁴⁹ The growth of privilege, intolerance, and the widening gap between stated theory and reality, all alarmed Serge. He was amazed that Zinoviev could still believe in the imminence of proletarian revolution in Western Europe, that Lenin could believe in the prospects of insurrection in the East.¹⁵⁰ Serge added, "The

¹⁴⁶ Memoirs, pp. 108-9.

¹⁴⁷ Serge, From Lenin to Stalin, pp. 33-34, "Trente Ans Apres ...," pp. 12-13, and Memoirs, pp. 108-9.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Memoirs, p. 112

¹⁵⁰ See also footnote 45 above.

wonderful lucidity of these great Marxists was beginning to be fuddled with a theoretical intoxication bordering on delusion; and they began to be enclosed within all the tricks and tomfooleries of servility."¹⁵¹ Yet Serge still saw Bolshevism as "tremendously and visibly right," marking "a new point of departure in history." The problem was that the revolutionary State was now better as a weapon of war than as a means of organizing production. More than ever, Serge saw the young State, in the process of disowning its former promises, becoming a danger to itself. As the Civil War drew to a close, the country was drained, exhausted and paralyzed by a moribund economic regime which was intolerable to the population: the regime of War Communism.¹⁵²

1.9. War Communism, Kronstadt, Emergent Totalitarianism

War Communism, as the social and economic system of the Civil War years came to be known, was, according to Lenin, "thrust upon us by war and ruin. It was not, nor could it be, a policy that corresponded to the economic tasks of the proletariat. It was a temporary measure."¹⁵³

Yu. Larin, in a discussion at the Socialist Academy, said of War Communism:

"We had to run the economy in the almost complete absence of normal economic conditions, and so inevitably the planned economy turned simply into the allocation of whatever was available. ...That is the principal reason why the planned economy under war communism took the form of administrative measures,

¹⁵¹ Ibid., p. 113.

¹⁵² Serge, "Trente Ans ...," p. 13.

¹⁵³ Lenin, cited by Maurice Dobb in Soviet Economic Development, Routledge, Kegan & Paul, London, 1966, p. 123.

not of economic regulation but of administrative allocations."¹⁵⁴

The system of War Communism did away with market relations and instead set up direct exchange between town and country through the requisitioning of grain and direct State distribution of industrial goods, concentrated economic authority and power, and eliminated money as a form of distribution.¹⁵⁵

Although War Communism evolved gradually as a reaction to circumstances, an ideology of War Communism developed with it, becoming a source of illusion to some about the possibility of a fast and immediate transition to communism. This was not based on an understanding of Marxism, but rather, superficially turned Marxism on its head.¹⁵⁶ It was a travesty of the Marxist vision of communism, which presumed a highly developed productive base, an abundance of goods and services, and an advanced, more democratic system of citizen participation in political, social and economic life than existed anywhere. Nor could communism exist in a single country. War communism, on the other hand, was based on social disintegration, destroyed production, absolute scarcity of goods and services, and centralized political authority and coercion. It could not be viable for long.

Serge began his description of War Communism by attacking Bukharin, for writing in his The Economy in the Period of

¹⁵⁴Yu. Larin (Mikhail Aleksandrovich Lourie), quoted in Alec Nove, An Economic History of the USSR, Penguin Books, London, 1969, p. 80.

¹⁵⁵For background on War Communism, the following sources were used: E. H. Carr, The Bolshevik Revolution, Vol. II, pp. 147-280, Isaac Deutscher, op.cit., pp. 487-510, Alec Nove, op.cit., pp. 78-82, Trotsky, My Life, Maurice Dobb, op.cit., Robert Daniels, The Conscience of the Revolution, pp.92-118, and Serge, Memoirs, pp. 114-134, Portrait de Staline, pp.57-59, and other works cited in discussion.

¹⁵⁶Once Stalin was in power, (after 1928-9) he appears to have copied the policies of war communism, and instituted it as his version of Marxist economic and social politics.

Transition, which Serge considered "schematic Marxism" that the present mode of organization (War Communism) was to be final.¹⁵⁷ Yet Serge pointed out no one could live under it; it was the reign of the black market, which everyone had to use, even Communists, in order to eat. Industrial production fell to less than 30% of the 1913 figure, as workers, in order to feed themselves and their families, spent their time making goods for the black market, instead of working in production.

The winter of 1920-21 was particularly torturous. Without fuel for heat pipes froze and sanitary conditions deteriorated. Famine was everywhere and typhus set in. Serge described a mansion that had once belonged to the society beauty Morskaya in which rooms were plastered with frozen excrement. Since the toilets wouldn't flush, the soldiers stationed there had installed field latrines on the floor boards.¹⁵⁸ Excrement seemed to line the streets and houses, waiting for the spring thaw and more disease. The situation was critical, and Serge recalled seeing a veteran revolutionary who told him the only way to put an end to speculation and to restore order was to resort to force. Serge, writing in the Memoirs some 20 years later, indicated that force "only made matters worse."¹⁵⁹ There is no written record of his thinking about War Communism at the time, however.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁷ Serge, Memoirs, pp. 115-118.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 117.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 118.

¹⁶⁰ Except for the already mentioned Civil War novel, Conquered City and two books about the siege of Petrograd, his journalistic output in this period concentrated on an analysis of the revolution (La Revolution d'Octobre a Moscou, "Bulletin Communiste, Sept. 1921), an analysis of the middle classes in the revolution ("Les Classes moyennes dans la Revolution russe," Clarte, 1922,) an article on Russian writers and the revolution "Les Ecrivains russes et la revolution," Clarte, 1922, an article on the four French Comintern delegates who perished at
(continued...)

Serge defined the system as requisitioning in the countryside, strict rationing in the town, wholesale nationalization of production, suppression of dissent and Bolshevik monopoly of power, a state of seige and the Cheka. The state of production was so catastrophic -- workers fled to the countryside in search of food, or were so occupied with the black market that they were lost to industry -- that drastic measures were needed to restore the nation's productive capacity and return to a normal working environment. Trotsky came up with the extreme solution of forcing workers back to work much like soldiers, in a scheme known as the militarization of labor.¹⁶¹ Trotsky presented his ideas in Dec.-Jan. 1919-1920, and met with an avalanche of protest. Lenin was wholeheartedly in favor of militarizing labor. Just as the policy was being implemented Trotsky traveled to the Urals and saw not only the desperate state of agricultural production but also the apathy and "numb insensibility"¹⁶² of the people. He concluded that war communism was not the remedy and some economic freedom was necessary to revitalize the peasantry. In February 1920, Trotsky proposed to end the system of requisitioning and to restore the market in the country. Trotsky's proposals were rejected by the Central Committee, and it was only after another disastrous year, that Lenin introduced the New Economic Policy, essentially taking up these very same proposals. During that year's delay, the Bolsheviks had to contend with mass discontent, culminating with the suppression of the Kronstadt rebellion. The revolution was at a crossroads.

¹⁶⁰ (...continued)

sea on their return; and articles on Mazine, Korolenko, the confession of Bakunin, Raymond Lefebvre.

¹⁶¹Deutscher, op. cit., pp. 490-493.

¹⁶²Deutscher, ibid., p. 496.

Serge was critical of War Communism in his Memoirs, written in 1941-2, describing its non-viability, sympathizing with its opponents, but also critical of its solution, the New Economic Policy. But in his treatment of War Communism, to which he devoted a chapter in Year One of the Russian Revolution, Serge was far less critical. He firstly called 'War Communism' a misnomer, agreeing with Kritsman¹⁶³ that the system represented "the organization of the natural economy of the proletariat."¹⁶⁴ Serge said the system was a "project for the organization of the Socialist society, undertaken in the most difficult circumstances."¹⁶⁵ Further, he said that

"the Factory Committees, were increasingly assuming managerial functions in production: in this process the direct management of production by the producers was beginning to be realized, and the organization of production began to be merged with the organization of the working class."¹⁶⁶

Serge was writing of the system in 1918-1919, not the later, more disastrous period of 1920-21. It was understandable that he saw the policy of War Communism as an attempt to shore up the economy in a period of complete breakdown of production and exchange, and for him to point to those aspects of the attempt which resembled the socialist goals of the future. Serge defended the Bolsheviks' dictatorship of the Party in the circumstances of working class decomposition due to the ravages

¹⁶³Kritsman was a Bolshevik economist and one of the first leaders of VSNKh (Vysshyyi Sovet Narodnoye Khozyaistvo) or Supreme Council of National Economy. Serge wrote in "The Worst Counter-Revolution," Inprecorr, Vol. 2, No. 108, Dec. 1922, of the play on words of VSNKh: 'Steal without fear, there is no master.' p. .

¹⁶⁴Quoted in Year One, p. 357 and 410-11n. It came from L. Kritsman's Geroicheskiy Period Velikoi Russkoi Revoliutsii, Moscow, 1926, which Serge called "remarkable" and "the only book which undertakes a serious analysis of War Communism."

¹⁶⁵Year One, p. 357.

¹⁶⁶Ibid.

of Civil War and famine, because there was no other possible choice. Democratic practices gave way to authoritarian centralism because of the demands of the situation and the influx of new Party members with no Marxist training. The Bolsheviks were right, in this "epoch of social war" to promote policies that would rapidly develop a "proletarian class consciousness."¹⁶⁷ Serge's reasoning was theoretically correct. It took him two years of experiencing War Communism to see the gaps between theory and reality, and to clearly analyze and act upon the shortcomings.

The system provoked general discontent and organized opposition. Serge was well placed to follow the discussion as practically the only member of governing circles in Petrograd to be on good terms with Mensheviks, Left SR's and anarchists. He had many long discussions with Shlyapnikov of the Workers Opposition, the only oppositional grouping Serge did not find bankrupt.¹⁶⁸ The Workers Opposition believed the revolution was doomed unless the Party restored genuine freedom and authority to the trade unions, workers control of production, and true Soviet democracy. Serge listened with sympathy, but did not side with the Workers Opposition.¹⁶⁹

The painful and bloody Civil War drew to a close, leaving a drained and exhausted country and a frustrated and discontent population. Anarchists were gaining support and were preparing

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., pp. 368-371.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 118.

¹⁶⁹ Memoirs, pp. 122-123. He treated the Workers Opposition sympathetically in his Retrato de Stalin, p. 58, pointing out their concern for the misery of the working class, the growing privileges of the bureaucracy and the strangulation of liberty. Serge took part in the Party discussions in Petrograd on the trade union question, and was horrified to see the "Party steamroller" at work, rigging the voting for Lenin and Zinoviev. It was no way to resolve any problem. Memoirs, p. 123.

their Congress when the Cheka suddenly arrested them en masse.¹⁷⁰ Serge was horrified by this treatment of the anarchists, especially of Makhno, who had successfully fought the White army of Denikin and Wrangel, only to be betrayed by the Reds. Serge said this "fantastic attitude of the Bolshevik authorities" had a terribly demoralizing effect and contributed directly to the revolt at Kronstadt.

Kronstadt

Serge wrote profusely about the significance of the suppression of the Kronstadt uprising, and it was a serious point of contention between Serge and Trotsky in 1938, which we will return to in chapter 5 of the present work. Serge's description of the Kronstadt events, written in the Memoirs, have been published separately as a pamphlet by the anarchist group "Solidarity" in London, and his work is widely cited by students of the Kronstadt controversy.¹⁷¹

For Serge, the errors and mistakes of power were exposed with the handling of the Kronstadt rebellion of Feb-March 1921.

¹⁷⁰ Memoirs, p. 122.

¹⁷¹ Serge wrote on Kronstadt in the Memoirs, pp. 124-132, (reprinted by Solidarity Press, London, 1967); New International, July 1938, "Once More: Kronstadt", pp. 211-212, (reprinted in the Monad Press Book Kronstadt, by Lenin and Trotsky, New York, 1979); February 1939 "A Letter and Some Notes," p. 53-4; La Vie Ouvriere, no. 152, March 31, 1922, "La tragique d'une revolution"; no. 159, May 19, 1922 "Le probleme de la dictature"; No 182, November 3, 1922, "Dictature et contre-revolution economique." Also, see the articles published in La Revolution proletarienne: Nos. 254 and 257, September 10, 1937 and October 25, 1937 under the title "La Vie et les faits"; no. 277, August 25, 1938, "Sur Cronstadt 1921 et quelques autre sujets"; and no. 281, October 25, 1938, "Cronstadt 1921: Defense de Trotsky, response a Trotsky, (under the title "La Vie et les faits"), no. , November 1947, "Trente Ans Apres la Revolution russe,"; in Retrato de Stalin, Ediciones Libres, Mexico 1940, p. 58; and in The Life and Death of Leon Trotsky, written in collaboration with Natalia Sedova Trotsky, New York, Basic Books, 1975, 106-108.

The sailors were protesting against the economic regime of War Communism and the dictatorship of the Party; but according to Serge they only revolted because of the brutality with which Kalinin refused to listen to them. As the quote below shows, Serge agreed the Bolsheviks were right to fight to hold on to power, but their mistake was "To panic at the Kronstadt revolt, which they could have handled...with persuasion and understanding." Nevertheless, Serge declared himself on the side of the Party, against the "infantile illusions" of the backward workers of Kronstadt.¹⁷²

The drastic economic situation of the country had isolated the Party in power. Serge wrote that the intentions and virtues of the Party were practically irrelevant since it could not govern a starving nation and maintain its popularity. The masses had lost their enthusiasm and the continuing sacrifices demanded by difficult circumstances were wearing down the remaining revolutionary activists. Petrograd workers were on strike, and the Kronstadt mutiny began as a movement of solidarity with the Petrograd workers. Lack of food, ferocious winters, sickness and constant requisitions "spread bitterness" everywhere. Serge said,

"This despair left people open to confusing bread with counter-revolution. If in this situation, the Bolsheviks had let go the reigns of power, who would have taken their place? Wasn't it their duty to hold on? They were right to hold on. Their mistake was to panic at the Kronstadt revolt which they could have handled in any number of ways, as we who were there, in Petrograd, know well."¹⁷³

Serge lived in the Hotel Astoria at the time, with the Petrograd leadership and the Cheka. Working in the Smolny, he was fully aware of events. Serge was uniquely placed as a Bolshevik with access both to the leadership circles of the Party and to the opposition groups outside the Party. He met

¹⁷² "Trente Ans..." pp. 13-15, and Memoirs, pp. 124-132.

¹⁷³ Serge, "Trente Ans Apres la Revolution Russe," p. 13.

with the anarchists, including the American anarchists Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman who tried to mediate the conflict as important members of the international working class.¹⁷⁴

Serge's version of events show a mess of fabrications, cover-ups and bungling. Where persuasion and understanding were needed, the President of the Executive Committee of the Soviets used only threats and insults.

"Instead of being fraternally received, the Kronstadt delegation to the Petrograd soviet was arrested by the Cheka. The truth about the conflict was hidden from the Party and from the country as a whole by the press, which for the first time, lied shamelessly, saying that a White general, Koslovski, was in charge in Kronstadt."¹⁷⁵

The well intentioned mediation efforts of Goldman and Berkman were inexplicably refused and instead of mediation, the cannons opened up a "fratricidal battle and the Cheka later shot its prisoners." Serge agreed with Trotsky that the sailors had changed since the revolutionary days of 1917, when they were in the vanguard of the revolution. It was true that now they

¹⁷⁴Serge met with the American anarchists nightly, but at the crucial meeting where the mediation attempt was discussed, held at Serge's father-in-law's house (Alexander Russakov) Serge did not attend as it had been decided that only the American anarchists would undertake this initiative because of their prestige, and the influence they held with the Kronstadt Soviet. Serge was on the verge of leaving the Party over Kronstadt, but was won over by his comrades who told him "where would you go? You have to face it, there is no one but us." Apparently Serge's ambivalence earned him the mistrust of both sides in this affair: Sedgwick notes that Marcel Body (Un piano en bouleau de Carelie: mes années de Russie 1919-1927, Paris 1981) told of Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman's hostility to Serge. (Sedgwick, "The Unhappy Elitist...", 15n, p. 126) After the failure of the mediation attempt the Russian mediators were arrested and Zinoviev offered the Americans the chance to tour the whole of Russia by special train to "Observe...and understand." Serge was spared because of his reputation and the 'kindness of Zinoviev, Zorin, and others." Memoirs, pp. 127-8. See also Victor Serge to Angelica Balabanova, Oct. 23, 1941.

¹⁷⁵"Trente Ans Apres..." p. 13.

expressed the aspirations of backward peasants, but Serge also said that ruling circles had changed as well.

Kronstadt was a tragedy, made even more so because of the insidious role played by rumor-mongering. Serge blamed Kalinin and Kuzmin¹⁷⁶ whose "brutal bungling had provoked the rebellion." The uprising of the sailors had been non-violent and according to Serge, the majority of Communists had rallied to their cause, proving the instability of the Party at its base. Kalinin and Kuzmin, had shown, from the first moment, no intention of using "anything but forcible methods" when it was still possible to mitigate the conflict.

The whole affair was shrouded in lies. The official press, which only "eulogized the regime's achievements" and concealed everything else, left the way open for all manner of rumors to be generated. The campaign of slander -- begun by certain sectors of the Party and the Cheka and picked up by the Press -- had the effect of stifling any discussion of the issues raised by the sailors. The sailors program, which Serge called "a programme for the Renewal of the Revolution" included: new elections to the Soviets, freedom of speech and press for all revolutionary groups, free trade unions, freedom of action for the peasants, release of political prisoners, abolition of road-blocks, and an end to requisitioning in the countryside. Yet as Serge himself admitted, the political conjuncture was one of a life or death struggle for survival, in which death meant proletarian blood would be spent in profusion. Abstract demands

¹⁷⁶Kuzmin was the commissar in charge of the fleet and the army. Rumor had it that he had been brutally handled during his captivity at Kronstadt, and had been earmarked for execution with orders written by counter-revolutionaries. When Serge saw him at Smolny following his 'escape from Kronstadt' Serge expressed incredulity that the sailors would shoot him. Kuzmin admitted it had been an exaggeration, that the so-called counter-revolutionary 'execution order' was but "some little sheet written in threatening terms." Nor had he been handled brutally, but "had a warm time of it, nothing more." Memoirs, pp. 126-7.

which were politically correct did not address the issue of the counter-revolution of the peasants and the Whites, although the demands did point to the danger that the excesses and abuses of power posed for the health of the revolution.

Worst of all for Serge -- worse than the abuses of authority -- was the realization that the Party had lied; a barrier had been broken. The press "was positively berserk with lies ... and this was our own Press, the Press of our revolution, the first socialist Press, and hence the first incorruptible and unbiased Press in the world!"¹⁷⁷

Yet Serge, after "many hesitations and with unutterable anguish" declared himself with the Party on the issue of Kronstadt. Greeman finds his position "difficult to understand."¹⁷⁸ But Serge explains his position very well; the choice was to support the party reluctantly or unleash the counter-revolution, which already had the embryonic forms of a black fascism. There was no choice. Serge's explanation deserves quotation in full:

"Kronstadt had right on its side. Kronstadt was the beginning of a fresh, liberating revolution for popular democracy: 'The Third Revolution!' it was called by certain anarchists whose heads were stuffed with infantile illusions. [my emphasis] However, the country was absolutely exhausted, and production practically at a standstill; there were no reserves of any kind, not even reserves of stamina in the hearts of the masses. The working class elite that had been moulded in the struggle against the old regime was literally decimated. The Party, swollen by the influx of power-seekers, inspired little confidence. Of the other parties, only minute nuclei existed, whose character was highly questionable. It seemed clear that these groupings could come back to life in a matter of weeks, but only by incorporating embittered, malcontent and inflammatory elements in their thousands, no longer, as in 1917, enthusiasts for the young revolution. Soviet democracy lacked leadership, institutions and inspiration; at its back

¹⁷⁷ Memoirs, pp. 125-6.

¹⁷⁸ Greeman, op. cit., pp. 277-79.

there were only masses of starving and desperate men.

The popular counter-revolution translated the demand for freely-elected Soviets into one for 'Soviets without Communists'. If the Bolshevik dictatorship fell, it was only a short step to chaos, and through chaos to a peasant rising, the massacre of the Communists, the return of the emigres, and in the end, through the sheer force of events, another dictatorship, this time anti-proletarian. Dispatches from Stockholm and Tallinn testified that the emigres had these very perspectives in mind; dispatches which, incidentally, strengthened the Bolshevik leaders' intention of subduing Kronstadt speedily and at whatever cost. We were not reasoning in the abstract. We knew that in European Russia alone there were at least fifty centres of peasant insurrection. To the south of Moscow, in the region of Tambov, Antonov, the Right Social-Revolutionary school-teacher, who proclaimed the abolition of the Soviet system and the re-establishment of the Constituent Assembly, had under his command a superbly organized peasant army numbering several tens of thousands. He had conducted negotiations with the Whites. (Tukhachevsky suppressed this Vendee around the middle of 1921.)

In these circumstance it was the Party's duty to make concessions recognizing that the economic regime was intolerable, but not to abdicate from power. [my emphasis] 'Despite its mistakes and abuses', I wrote, 'the Bolshevik Party is at present the supremely organized, intelligent and stable force which, despite everything, deserves our confidence. The Revolution has no other mainstay, and is no longer capable of any thoroughgoing regeneration.'¹⁷⁹

Serge acted as a consistent revolutionary -- brutally honest and rooted in concrete socio-economic conditions. He was not alone; other dissident communists joined him in supporting the Bolsheviks, since there really was no other organized force. But Serge was demoralized by the whole affair. The Tenth Party Congress, which convened in Moscow at the same time as the Red Army was attacking the Kronstadt fleet, ironically abolished requisitioning, and the system of War Communism, and proclaimed the New Economic Policy (NEP). As the demands of the Kronstadt sailors were being met, they were being massacred.

¹⁷⁹ Memoirs, pp. 128-129.

NEP, according to Serge, was a response to Lenin's realization that the regime had become untenable in a rigid position, and which Trotsky, the year before had denounced as dangerous and in need of the changes Lenin had just proclaimed. The NEP abolished requisitions in the countryside, reestablished the freedom of commerce and small-scale business, and made concessions on attractive terms to foreign capital. "In a word, it [NEP] loosened the mortal grip on the country of the complete 'statization' [state control] over production and exchange."¹⁸⁰ It amounted to a partial restoration of capitalism, but did not bring with it any relaxation of authority or political tolerance.

Instead, a purge was directed toward the Party, while the other Parties were effectively outlawed. Serge lamented that disciplinary measures were directed at those "with a critical outlook" rather than against "the unprincipled careerists and conformist late-comers".¹⁸¹ As far as the other parties were concerned, Serge sympathized with Raphael Abramovich's criticism of the Bolshevik Central Committee in 1921 for not being more tolerant to those who "accepted the parameters of the Soviet constitution." A policy directed toward reconciliation would have been more desirable. Serge admitted that had "a coalition government ... been formed at this time, it would have internalized certain dangers, but, and this is well-proven, they would have been less than the danger of this monopoly of power..."¹⁸²

¹⁸⁰ "Trente Ans Apres...", p. 14.

¹⁸¹ Memoirs, p. 135.

¹⁸² "Trente Ans Apres...", p. 14. Although Serge was upholding the right to voice and organize around critical viewpoints, he also admitted elsewhere that by 1921 all revolutionaries were already inside the Bolshevik Party, as the other parties had proved their bankruptcy in the course of the revolution and Civil War. Yet Serge was correct, nevertheless, to criticize the effects of the growing siege mentality within the Party.

Emergent Totalitarianism

1921 was a crossroads for the revolution, though Serge did not consider it Thermidor.¹⁸³ Interestingly, at the height of the Kronstadt assault Serge quoted Lenin as saying to one of his friends: "This is Thermidor."¹⁸⁴ It was a turning point for the Party, for Soviet democracy and for the Comintern as well, as the Kronstadt events coincided with the collapse of a Communist rising in Germany. The defeat would signal new tactics in the International, passing from the offensive to the defensive.

March 18 was a day of ironies: Kronstadt sailors were meeting their death shouting "Long live the world revolution!" on the 50th anniversary of the Paris Commune, while in Berlin, German communists were going down in defeat. Serge described the atmosphere in Smolny as tense and somber, with conversation generally being avoided "except with ... closest friends, and among close friends, what was said was full of bitterness."¹⁸⁵

According to Serge, although the term 'totalitarianism' did not yet exist, it was on its way to crushing the revolution. The monopoly of political power, the Cheka, the Red Army had turned the dream of the 'Commune-State' into a far off theoretical myth. War Communism, famine (with its bureaucratic rationing-apparatus), Civil War and counter-revolution had killed Soviet democracy. Serge said he belonged to "the pitifully small minority" that realized what was happening. There had been hope that the conditions of peace would bring

¹⁸³ Thermidor was realized in November 1927, according to Serge, ironically on the tenth anniversary of the October Revolution. This coincided with the defeat of the Opposition within the Party and the subsequent expulsion, arrest and deportation of its members; and the sacrificing of the Chinese proletariat for the prestige and power of Stalin. Memoirs, pp. 213-225.

¹⁸⁴ Memoirs, p. 131.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 132.

about a spontaneous resurgence of Soviet democracy, but no one had any conception of how this would happen. Serge concluded that renewal from within was not possible, that only the extension of the Russian revolution would bring fresh energy and the resources for industrialization. But the German communists had just been defeated and world revolution was not at hand.

Serge began to question certain aspects of Marxism in light of subsequent events and to look especially at this period as the beginning of what he called Soviet totalitarianism. He believed he was the first to coin this term, in 1921. It was later taken up by Trotsky, and subsequently by anti-communist and liberal critics of the Soviet Union. Later in Serge's life, he extended his analysis to the first socialist utopian experiments.¹⁸⁶

What Serge was questioning was the totality of the socialist goal. Capitalism in its advanced industrial form was a world system which dominated every aspect of life -- making everything conform to its overt and covert organization of social, economic and political existence. Marxism, therefore, had as its response and its goal, to renew and transform everything from property and social relations, to the world map, and the inner life of man. The physical world would be changed through the abolition of national boundaries and man's inner life would be transformed by liberating the mind from religious thought. Thus, Serge concluded that the project itself, insofar as it aspired to total transformation, was etymologically totalitarian.¹⁸⁷ Of course in this sense capitalism is

¹⁸⁶Typescript, "A definition of Socialism," unpublished, no date, Serge archives, Mexico.

¹⁸⁷Serge discussed his views of emergent totalitarianism on pp. 133-134 of the Memoirs. He differs significantly from the later 'totalitarian school of Sovietology;' Serge's analysis was not static, but rather looked at the society through the dynamic of conflict; nor did he see the Soviet Union as classless, as do the Totalitarians of the Friedrich, Brzezinski, Kornhauser mode of thinking.

totalitarian as well. One cannot opt out of capitalism, capitalist ideology is pervasive and ubiquitous, and capitalist political power does not tolerate any opposition which in a real sense threatens its integrity.

But Serge went on to point out the dual nature of socialism ascendant, in its democratic and authoritarian aspects. Serge's analysis was fraught with contradictions, of which he, and the Bolsheviks in general, were only too aware. Serge points to the source of the Party's intolerance as its conviction that the Party "is the repository of truth." This conviction gives the Party both moral energy and simultaneously a "clerical mentality ... quick to become Inquisitorial."¹⁸⁸

The Bolsheviks were aware of the contradiction between their democratic goals and their authoritarian methods, justified by the danger of reaction. Serge said they could often only surmount their contradictions through demagoguery. Serge never criticized Lenin for not being sincere in his goal of the 'broadest possible workers democracy.' Yet Serge asked rhetorically what the meaning of 'rule' was, referring to ubiquitous posters announcing 'the rule of workers will never cease.'¹⁸⁹ At this point Serge did not resolve the theoretical problem he raised with regard to the contradiction between the totality of the Marxist project and its practical consequences. Yet he did posit an anti-bureaucratic alternative, with elements of syndicalism, for more democratic practical functioning in the period of transition to socialism, to which we will return presently.

1.10. Bureaucratic Centralism + NEP, or 'Communism of associations'?

Although NEP was bringing economic recovery and life to the arts, Serge was dismayed by the new kingdom of the market. He

¹⁸⁸ Memoirs, p. 134.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

indicated other Civil War veterans were equally confused; why did they fight and spill so much blood, to see a return of the market?¹⁹⁰ Serge was most distressed that democracy had been obliterated, yet glad that War Communism was over.

Serge was opposed to even a limited revival of the capitalist market, and instead proposed an alternative which would bring about a degree of prosperity without giving rise to speculation, greed and corruption. He began to argue for a 'Communism of associations' as opposed to the 'Communism of the State.' Cognizant that the Bolshevik leadership had already embarked upon and was committed to the NEP solution, Serge offered his theoretical vision to visiting Comintern delegates and international revolutionaries in casual meetings at the Hotel Lux, fully aware his ideas would remain at the level of theoretical interest, but nonetheless worthy of reflection.¹⁹¹

In Serge's view, economic recovery could have been achieved without a return to the market -- by freeing the State-strangled cooperatives to initiative from below in the form of associations which would take over the management of different branches of the economy. He gave the time-honored shoe example.¹⁹² There was a shortage of both shoes and leather, yet the rural areas had plenty of leather. In Serge's vision, the unfettered shoe makers cooperatives could easily have obtained the necessary leather and made the shoes, if left to themselves. They would likely charge high prices for these shoes, but less than the exorbitant prices encountered in the black market. The State would intervene in the arena of price regulation: in this instance, the State could assist this form of workers control by exercising a downward pressure on prices.

¹⁹⁰ Memoirs p. 147.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² It would be interesting to count how many treatises on the Soviet economy resort to the example of shoe production.

Workers in other branches of production would similarly spontaneously organize cooperatives to fill collective needs. Serge's view of the State and planning would be "not something dictated by the State from on high, but rather as resulting from the harmonizing, by congresses and specialized assemblies, of initiatives from below."¹⁹³ Serge did not elaborate on the State's role in distribution in this cooperative form of workers controlled production. But production in this manner could avoid the twin evils of the capitalist market and the 'muddle and paralysis' of 'stringent bureaucratic centralism.' Serge's view of economic relations represent basic, objective forms of spontaneous cooperation, what Ernest Mandel more than 60 years later would call "articulated workers' self-management."¹⁹⁴ Combined with democratic planning at the macro level, this economic form would constitute the ideal for the transition period that is moving toward socialism, while still containing money and some market forms. Serge was vague on the role of planning in his early critique, (seeing the plan as harmonizing initiatives from below) but elaborated more fully after evaluating the experience of Stalin's industrialization and the nature of the Soviet economy.¹⁹⁵ Clearly Serge's view is more than a syndicalist reprise;¹⁹⁶ it is much closer to the Marxist

¹⁹³ Memoirs, pp. 147-148.

¹⁹⁴ Ernest Mandel, "In Defence of Socialist Planning," in New Left Review 159, September-October 1986, pp.22-32. (The article itself runs from pp. 5-37.)

¹⁹⁵ See chapters 4 and 6 of the present work.

¹⁹⁶ Sedgwick intimates in his introduction to the Memoirs that Serge's vision represents an advanced syndicalism. Robert Daniels, in Conscience of the Revolution also refers to the anarcho-syndicalist side of Leninism; unfortunately Stalinism has distorted Marxism to such a degree that when democratic, workers control is put forward, it is immediately attributed to a syndicalist or anarchist throwback. As I have argued elsewhere in this thesis, Serge's influences after 1917 were
(continued...)

notion of socialism, as the planned self-rule of the associated producers.¹⁹⁷

1.11. Disillusionment and romantic retreat

Serge was disgusted by the growing bureaucratization of the Bolshevik Party and the self-serving opportunists entering its ranks, stunned by the Kronstadt events, and psychologically exhausted. He associated with two Communist sections, the French language Communist group and the Petrograd Russian communists; after Kronstadt he wondered with many of them how they could usefully serve the revolution, 'without closing their eyes.' Serge had no interest in bureaucratic sinecures; he was offered a diplomatic post in the Orient, but declined. The Orient interested him but not diplomacy.¹⁹⁸

Serge participated in the Third Congress of the Comintern in Moscow (June-July 1921) which he found utterly lacking in inspiration. The foreign delegates, in their desire to approve, had abdicated all critical thinking, and didn't seem to notice the discrepancy between the lavish privileges they enjoyed and the condition of the starving populace. Serge found them "quick to adulate and reluctant to think."¹⁹⁹ Almost immediately after the congress, Serge retired to the countryside.

¹⁹⁶ (...continued)

Marxist, and it was his lifelong project to rescue Marxism from its Stalinist deformation and restore in the public perception the synonymity of Marxian socialism and democracy.

¹⁹⁷ Serge was not alone in his preoccupation about the direction of the economy, seemingly destined toward either blind market forces, or authoritarian bureaucratic centralism. These issues are the same ones which surface in 1923 with the Left Opposition of the New Course. Serge here predates their concerns by two years.

¹⁹⁸ Memoirs, p. 149.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., p.138 and p. 146.

Serge thought he had found a way out. He and his father-in-law Russakov, a group of his French communist friends, and some Hungarian prisoners-of-war founded 'the French Commune of Novaya-Ladoga' on an abandoned estate north of Petrograd. Demoralized by the petty greed, corruption and speculation revived under NEP, and the lack of political liberty, Serge and his comrades retreated to the countryside to live off the land.

The harsh realities soon hit these revolutionary romantics. They were boycotted by the local peasants who went so far as stealing their corn and tools, while refusing to sell to them. The peasants viewed Serge's group with hostility and hatred, calling them "Jews" and "Anti-Christ." After three months of hunger and exhaustion, the Commune was abandoned.

Serge returned to Petrograd and continued frequenting literary and humanist circles. He belonged to 'Volfila' or the 'Free Philosophic society' whose guiding light was the symbolist poet Andrei Bely. Serge was the only Communist member.²⁰⁰

Yet Serge was increasingly bothered by the petty-profiteering and corrupting influence of money -- the seeming resurgence of all the filth of former times.²⁰¹ His friends shared his distress and many quietly dropped out of political life. Serge's sojourn in the agricultural commune indicated he was of like mind. But Serge confessed that he was made of 'tougher stuff,' having both a "broader vision of the Revolution" and "less individualistic sentiment." Although Serge was less optimistic than the Bolshevik leadership about the prospect of successful revolution in the West, he agreed that Russia's only chance for survival was pinned on the international extension of the Revolution. Serge was convinced that revolutionary Russia, in the throes of hunger, isolation and defeat, would collapse if left to itself. He decided to go

²⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 150.

²⁰¹ Serge, From Lenin to Stalin, p. 39.

to Central Europe, "the focus of events to come" to work toward building a "Western working-class movement capable of supporting the Russians and, one day, superseding them."²⁰² His wife Liuba, in precarious mental and physical health after all the privations, and his own anxiety with the turn of events in the Soviet Union also propelled him to leave. A change of scenery and new activity would be welcome. He accepted a Comintern post in Berlin, editing the French edition of the Comintern journal Inprecor, or La Correspondance Internationale.²⁰³ It was late 1921.²⁰⁴

The revolutionary stance Serge took in late 1921, to rigorously analyze the political conjuncture and determine the necessities and possibilities of the moment took him on his illegal European assignment. The same logic would bring him back to Russia four years later, to take his stand with the Left Opposition, the only hope Serge saw for revolutionary renewal after internal and external defeat, corruption and decay.

²⁰²Memoirs, pp. 155-56.

²⁰³Inprecor is an acronym of International Press Correspondence.

²⁰⁴Articles datelined Berlin, penned by Serge under his pseudonym "R. Albert," began to appear in November 1921.



CHAPTER TWO: ON COMINTERN ASSIGNMENT IN BERLIN AND VIENNA 1922-1926

2.1 Petrograd to Berlin: Impressions

The contrast provided by a simple journey to another country could not have been more dramatic. Serge stopped with his family in Talinn, now Reval, in Estonia. Seeing some bricklayers building houses, Serge was overcome with emotion. After witnessing so much destruction, this simple act of building moved him deeply.¹ The streets lined with shops made Serge recall the Volga territories, where "the children of Russia were turning into living skeletons." Serge said he now understood the theory and politics of the self-determination of nationalities, "raised as it was to perfection by the blockade of the Revolution."²

Serge travelled to Berlin 'illegally' with a dozen other agents of the International. Although Serge was vague about the date,³ Richard Greeman placed his arrival in Berlin in December 1921, with Serge's chronicle beginning with the events of 1922.⁴

Once in Berlin, Serge was instantly struck by the orderly collapse of post-Versailles Germany. Capitalism was rampant, amidst insolvency. According to Serge, the capitalists lived in fear of revolution; only the Social-

¹Victor Serge, Memoirs of a Revolutionary, p. 157-8.

²Ibid.

³Serge is often imprecise about dates in the Memoirs. He wrote of his activities in the USSR in Autumn 1921, and begins his discussion of Germany with the events of 1922. In his Clarke article of Dec. 1, 1923, Serge says he arrived 'at the end of 1921.'

⁴Richard Greeman, Victor Serge, The Making of a Novelist (1890-1928), unpublished dissertation, Columbia University, 1968, p. 284.

Democrats believed in capitalism's future!⁵ Serge placed the blame for Germany's state of collapse on the industrial bourgeoisie, who were completing the ruin of the German economy which the war had begun. The bourgeoisie, driven now to speculation and no longer capable of sustaining the arts, sciences, universities, libraries and other hallmarks of civilization, had become the enemy of German culture as it had developed since 1848.⁶

The German Social Democrats had the misfortune to preside over this societal disintegration,⁷ although they did so with a very democratic constitution. Serge saw these social democratic misleaders as the standard-bearers of the liberal bourgeoisie of 1848, with their enlightened, optimistic attitudes.⁸ Yet Weimar Germany gave the impression of a society self-destructing: everything appeared for sale, including "the daughters of the bourgeoisie in the bars, the daughters of the people in the streets, officials, import and export licenses, State papers, businesses in whose prospects nobody believed."⁹

The decay and accompanying decadence that characterized Germany in the period of 1922-23 had the effect of making the 'spartan' conditions of the proletarian revolution in the Soviet Union look clean, pure and healthy by comparison, so that even Russia's authoritarian excesses could be put into some kind of perspective from this state of decline. Thus the change of scenery afforded by the assignment to Germany had

⁵Memoirs, pp. 159-160.

⁶R. Albert, "Devant la revolution allemande: Les Riches contre la nation,: Clarte, No. 46, (Nov. 1, 1923), p. 428.

⁷And in taking on the responsibility, shared some of the blame.

⁸Serge, Memoirs, p. 160.

⁹Ibid, p. 159.

the affect of reanimating Serge insofar as the Soviet Union was concerned. His acquaintances and colleagues in the Comintern had the same affect on Serge: he remarked that the editorial staff of Inprecor, the "intellectual and political mentor of the world Communist movement, was of an outstanding mediocrity."¹⁰

2.2 Serge's Activities as Comintern Agent in Berlin

Serge set to work in his new duties as Comintern agent and editor of La Correspondance Internationale, the French edition of Inprecorr, or International Press Correspondence. Inprecorr was published simultaneously in three languages, with the German edition being the fullest.¹¹ Serge wrote under various pseudonyms, often writing whole issues of the magazine.¹² He most often used the name 'R. Albert' writing the section entitled "Notes d'Allemagne" of LCI, usually datelining his articles Berlin.¹³ In the Memoirs, Serge said his articles signed Victor Serge were datelined Kiev, a city

¹⁰Ibid., p. 162.

¹¹The Comintern had various publications, usually published simultaneously in several languages. Kommunisticheskii Internatsional (beginning in 1919) was published in Russian, German, French and English, with the Russian edition coming out most regularly; Internationale Presse-Korrespondenz (beginning in Sept 1921) was published in German, English and French, the English and French being less full than the German; Serge edited the French edition, called La Correspondance Internationale. For a description of these journals, see E.H. Carr, The Bolshevik Revolution 1917-1923; Volume 3, Bibliography, pps. 580-582; and Franz Borkenau, World Communism, Bibliographical Notes, pp. 430-431.

¹²According to Julian Gorkin, Serge's close associate in Mexico, in an interview conducted by Richard Greeman in Paris in 1964. Cited in Greeman, op.cit., p. 286.

¹³His articles are listed in the Bibliography. A collection of Serge's writings on Germany are being prepared for publication in Spanish. (EDP 1988)

Serge had never visited.¹⁴ These articles mostly dealt with the Soviet Union.

Since Serge's activities took on the character of clandestine political life, he was known first as Siegfried and then Gottlieb at his office at the Rote Fahne (Communist Party daily), Dr. Albert in town and in his articles, Victor Klein on his papers, Alexei Berlovsky in his travels to Russia.¹⁵ Serge functioned as an underground agent. When he passed Radek in the street, they exchanged knowing glances but did not speak.

Serge's analysis of the world situation which had partially propelled him to move to Central Europe to help build "a Western working class movement capable of supporting the Russian and, one day, superceding them"¹⁶ was not altered by his sojourn in Germany. Although he was only too aware of the weakness of German revolutionary leadership, he still viewed socialist revolution in Europe as the key to the salvation of civilization. Serge was also alert to the danger of fascism which was gaining ground.¹⁷ This overall perspective guided his articles of the period, which essentially promoted the Comintern line on Germany. Serge intimated that he was sometimes obliged to print things he knew were wrong, and he watched the growing careerism and corruption of the Comintern

¹⁴Memoirs, p. 161.

¹⁵Alexei Berlovsky was a former Russian prisoner-of-war in Germany. Memoirs, p. 161.

¹⁶See previous chapter, p. 97-98 *infra*.

¹⁷Serge had followed the progress of fascism closely and opposed the leadership of the International on this question. They underestimated the threat of reaction, but Serge said this "new variety of counter-revolution had taken the Russian Revolution as its schoolmaster in matters of repression and mass-manipulation through propaganda ... [and] had succeeded in recruiting a host of disillusioned, power-hungry ex-revolutionaries; consequently, its rule would last for years." Memoirs, pp. 160-163.

with alarm. His colleagues Gyula Alperi and Franz Dahlem struck him as typical of the new kind of unthinking, yes-men who were filling the Comintern ranks. With such human material staffing the Comintern, domination of national sections by the Russian leadership, already a tendency due to their status as successful revolutionists and founders of the International, was accelerated.

Serge changed identity and nationality, he wrote, as required by circumstances. He bought a Polish identity card for \$10 and a few cigars from the Berlin Polizeiprasidium, which turned out to be useless, because the Polish annexation of Upper Silesia reinforced the anti-Polish feeling in Germany and made life impossible until he traded his Polish nationality card for a Lithuanian one.¹⁸

Serge kept abreast of events at home in the Soviet Union. As a member of the Comintern Executive, he traveled to Moscow to attend meetings. In his capacity as a journalist, he attended the historic meeting of the Three Internationals on April 22, 1922 at the Reichstag building in Berlin. Representatives of the Socialist International, the Two-and-a-Half International¹⁹ and the Third International met to lay the basis for cooperation between socialists. The meeting ended in failure after representatives of the Second International attacked political persecution in Russia generally and in particular the impending Moscow trial of the Socialist Revolutionary Party leadership. Never a defender of the SR's -- the party of the 'middle peasantry' as he called them in Year One -- Serge sympathized with their criticisms,

¹⁸Memoirs, p. 158.

¹⁹The name given by its enemies to the 'International Working Union of Socialist Parties, popularly known as the 'Vienna Union'; Serge thought it an appropriate name for the centrist groups "conglomerated midway between the reformists and the Bolsheviks." See E.H. Carr, The Bolshevik Revolution, Vol. 3, pp.407-8, and Serge, Memoirs, p.163-4.

but quoted Bukharin's response: "These people are determined never to fight for Socialism." Serge noted that Bukharin then added as though "by way of a directive, 'Our Press must attack them mercilessly.'" ²⁰

Serge was greatly distressed watching the proceedings of the trial against the SR's from Berlin. Now that the Civil War was over, he wrote, "were we going to shed the blood of a defeated party which, in the old days, had furnished the Revolution with so many of its heroes?" What worried Serge most was that he heard the Politburo's decision to 'behead this peasant party of significance' was taken in the belief the revolution was 'moving towards an inevitable crisis with the peasantry.'²¹ Serge moved into action to prevent this 'calamity' along with Clara Zetkin, Jacques Sadoul and Boris Souvarine. Gorky also wrote Lenin. In the end, no one was killed. The Serge who had privately interceded on behalf of victims of the Cheka during the Civil War was continuing on the same path, from Berlin.

2.3 Conditions in Germany: Background

Germany had been in the throes of a revolutionary crisis since 1918. The war had bled the country white; its best brains and talent had been wasted on the battlefield which made a few German financial speculators very wealthy. Strikes and mutinies increased towards the end of the war, gathering widespread support.

The support of the war by the leaders of Germany's left and center parties had produced big cleavages between the leaders and the masses. The political spectrum in Germany

²⁰Serge, ibid., p. 163-4. Serge certainly agreed with Bukharin that these Second Internationalists would never fight for socialism; he had amply noted how in Germany they believed in capitalism more than the bourgeoisie, and were responsible, as power-holders, for the murder of Liebknecht and Luxembourg.

²¹Ibid.

ranged from ultra nationalists and fascists on the right, to Social Democrats and Independents in the center, to the Spartakus on the left, synonymous according to one writer, with revolutionary.²² The last days of the war had seen violent mutinies in the Armed Forces. 'Revolutionary Shop Stewards' in Berlin prepared for a general strike on November 9, 1918. With this strike the monarchy was swept away and the armistice was signed the next day.

The Social Democrats and Independents formed a joint government headed by Ebert and Scheidemann. Serge called them the "Socialists of counter-revolution,"²³ and their government one of "social conservatism."²⁴ The anti-revolutionary Social Democrat Gustav Noske was named war minister. Increasingly, the society was polarized between left and right. Serge's impression was that the young people wanted revolution, but that they were both nationalistic and socialist-inclined, although they wanted nothing to do with their Social Democratic leaders.²⁵ The key leaders of the Spartakusbund, forerunner of the German Communist Party, were imprisoned during the war. Karl Liebknecht, son of Wilhelm Liebknecht, and Rosa Luxembourg, the brilliant Polish Marxist -- both anti-war Zimmerwaldian revolutionaries -- were among those imprisoned and then freed after the armistice in November 1918.²⁶ Upon their release and the armistice, the revolutionary crisis became acute.

²²See Borkenau, p. 112.

²³Serge, Year One of the Russian Revolution, p.324.

²⁴Ibid., p. 342.

²⁵Memoirs, p. 160.

²⁶Serge was similarly imprisoned during much of the war and released upon the signing of the armistice: see Chap. 1 infra. Liebknecht was released in October, prior to the Armistice, and Luxembourg was released about a month later, after the end of the War.

The left was divided politically and geographically. Rosa Luxembourg, Karl Liebknecht, Leo Jogiches, Franz Mehring and Paul Levi were in Berlin, while another group in Bremen was inspired by Radek and Lenin. Luxembourg was the most capable Marxist in Germany.²⁷ Serge said she was "the only brain of Western Socialism in the same class as Lenin and Trotsky."²⁸ She was opposed to revolutionary coups before the mass movement was ready to contest power. They would become ready to take power through what she saw as a building crescendo of strikes and the formation of councils, embryonic organs of the workers state, or class dictatorship of the proletariat.

Serge wrote about the defeat of the German workers in 1918 in his history Year One of the Russian Revolution.²⁹ He saw the German Communist Party as too young and inexperienced and without the cadres or the leadership capable of daring initiative. The German proletariat, on the other hand, said Serge, was too subservient to the Social Democrats, who had become the defenders of capitalism. Liebknecht was too impatient and made a grave error in signing the manifesto calling for the deposing of Ebert and Schiedemann without consulting the Central Committee, and in so doing, initiated an untimely insurrection which he was unable to guide. Luxembourg initially opposed Liebknecht and then supported him. She was, as Serge noted, clear-sighted but powerless.³⁰

²⁷She and Lenin had polemicized with one another over the question of self-determination of nations, and the role of the vanguard party -- the Leninist theory of organization. She had also been at odds with Radek, the Comintern emissary to Germany, when they had been leaders of different factions of Polish social Democracy before the war.

²⁸Serge, Year One of the Russian Revolution, p. 322.

²⁹Serge, Ibid., Chapter 10: "The German Revolution," pp. 312-349.

³⁰Ibid.

The armistice had signalled the collapse of the established political order in Central Europe and was the prelude to the revolutionary struggles of 1919. The Bolsheviks and the Zimmerwaldian leftists viewed these events as the approach of revolution in Europe, the beginning of the realization of their deepest hopes.³¹ Anti-war strikes in Central Europe during 1917-1918 now became political and more openly revolutionary. Workers and Soldiers councils appeared in Berlin, Munich, Vienna, and Budapest.³² Soviet Russia watched keenly the unfolding events in Germany, seeing parallels with their own revolutionary development. The Bolsheviks were heartened by the revolutionary upsurge in Central Europe, which they viewed as central to their own survival. Their hopes were to be dashed.

In Germany, the consequences of the failed Spartacist uprising in Berlin in January 1919 were catastrophic. Directed against the policies of Ebert's Social Democratic Government, the uprising ended with the arrest and murder on January 15 of Germany's most capable revolutionary leaders, Rosa 'Luxembourg and Karl Liebknecht. War Minister Gustav Noske, charged with the suppression of the Spartacist uprising, ordered the assassination of the two revolutionaries.³³ Two months later, Leo Jogiches (Tyszko)

³¹See Lenin and Trotsky's statements to the ViTsik on October 3, 1918: Lenin began, "The German crisis means either that the revolution has begun, or that it is imminent and inevitable" (Lenin, Collected Works, Vol. 28, pp. 101-103) and Trotsky continued, "If the proletariat of Germany undertakes the offensive, the first duty of Soviet Russia, in the revolutionary struggle, will be to take no account of national frontiers. Russia of the Soviet is no more than the vanguard of the German and the European revolution...." (Quoted in Serge, Year One, pp.316-317.)

³²Glasgow and Seattle also were the sites of revolutionary strikes and the formation of workers councils in 1919.

³³Theses Resolutions and Manifestos of The First Four Congresses of the Third International, p. 462n.

was similarly murdered, to be followed later by the death of Franz Mehring and the assassination of Eugen Levine, effectively decapitating Germany's young Communist Party. The repercussions were to be felt in the succeeding revolutionary waves culminating in the revolution of 1923. The leadership of the KPD was left in the hands of the young intellectual Paul Levi, who had been Rosa Luxembourg's lawyer and was greatly influenced by her political thinking, though he lacked her stature. Karl Radek, the representative of the Soviet Government in Germany took an active leadership role. There is no evidence of Serge's role, other than his journalistic output as a propagandist for the Comintern, in any of the sources consulted, except Serge's own Memoirs.

The defeats of 1919 were not the end of the revolutionary crisis. There followed the Kapp Putsch and the General Strike of March 1920. The young and inexperienced Communist Party of Germany adventuristically tried to unleash a general offensive before the majority of the workers was ready to accept its lead. Having burned itself in March, the KPD wavered in crucial moments in the 1923 revolutionary crisis.

The defeats in 1920 revealed the crisis of revolutionary leadership and the contradictions of Comintern policy. Bukharin, Zinoviev and Radek believed that in light of the developing revolutionary potential, the European parties were too inactive, and had to assume the offensive. At home, Lenin was calling for the revolutionary breathing spell and peaceful coexistence: NEP had supplanted War Communism. The contradictions between the revolutionary breathing spell and the revolutionary offensive were reflected in the German party. The Kapp putsch, led by German generals and put down by the general strike of German workers (led by the German trade union federation under Legien) presented a moment of choice for the German Communist Party. The leadership of the Party had vacillated -- first opposing the strike and then reversing its stand. The revolutionaries had missed a rare opportunity

to attempt to take power following the General Strike. As a result, the German Party was mangled. Comintern leaders differed in their analysis of the Kapp putsch and the opportunistic approach of the KPD, but roundly attacked Levi. Events had moved quickly and the Bolsheviks watched from a distance; those closer to the ground had a more nuanced understanding of the difficulties of the situation.

The occupation of the Ruhr by the French in January 1923 led to a disastrous devaluation of the mark and economic decay befell the country. Protests against the Versailles Treaty and its consequences grew, sparked by the French occupation. The Communist Party's ranks grew rapidly as the economic crisis further polarized German society.

Serge's articles from Germany concentrated on the conditions of decay, utilizing statistics to show the impoverishment of even the German middle classes, reduced like the workers to hunger and begging in the wake of massive unemployment and galloping inflation. Characteristically, Serge evoked the ambience by describing what happened to one person, in this case "an old lady with a black lace neckband" paying for her purchases at a store with hundred mark notes from the previous year, during the "age of Walter Rathenau."³⁴ When she was told the money was worthless, she became confused. Events, Serge explained, needed to be followed hourly, as they hurried on at a dizzying pace. Inflation was catastrophic, accompanied by widespread speculation in currency; the rate of exchange with the dollar often changed twice a day, which caused utter chaos in commerce. People took to rioting outside the grocers and bakeries. Since there was no rationing, the shops could be stripped of their wares by panicked shoppers with money as often as the exchange rate changed. Hunger and destitution set in in the working class neighborhoods.

³⁴Memoirs, p. 168.

Politically, Serge's articles reflect the general line of Comintern policy toward Germany, and more specifically, of the emerging Left Opposition within the Bolshevik Party. Serge's assessment of conditions in Germany were more guarded and cautious than that of the Bolsheviks, because he was there to see the actual state of revolutionary leadership. The debates around Germany's KPD and the role of the Comintern in the revolution of 1923 were decisive in the internal struggle emerging in the Bolshevik Party. Much of German revolutionary policy was decided in Moscow. Radek travelled back and forth frequently. Serge also travelled to Moscow on Comintern business.

2.4 Serge Returns to Moscow

Serge returned to Moscow to attend an enlarged session of the Comintern Executive. The date in the Memoirs for this trip was the end of 1922, precisely the time for the Fourth Congress of the International. But Serge did not attend the Fourth Congress of the Comintern, which in any case was held in Petrograd.³⁵ As Richard Greeman points out³⁶, Serge was wrong about the date. Rosmer gave June 12, 1923 as the date of the Executive meeting, which he also attended,³⁷ and Greeman spoke to Jeanne Maurin, who recalled seeing Serge in Moscow in June 1923. Serge's description of Moscow's convalescence included "bare-foot youngsters" running in the streets until dawn, offering flowers to lovers, suggestive more of June than December in Russia.

Serge was pleasantly surprised by the relative prosperity he encountered in Russia, due to NEP. It will be recalled,

³⁵Rosmer, Moscow Under Lenin, pp.167-172, and Theses Resolutions and Manifestos of the First Four Congresses of the Third International, pp.309-436.

³⁶Greeman, op. cit., pp. 293-294.

³⁷Rosmer, Ibid., p. 196.

Serge was opposed to NEP, which he saw as a regression,³⁸ reintroducing disparities in wealth, with the reappearance of greed, and the quest for lucre; in short, the vices they had hoped to eliminate in making the first successful socialist revolution in the world. The return of the market, it seemed to Serge, made a waste of all the blood spilt in the Civil War and attendant famine.

But NEP was a response to famine and the standstill in industry -- insupportable conditions. As opposed as Serge was to market solutions, he was glad of any change which would revive industry.³⁹

While Serge despaired of the gambling, corruption, theft, and the growing chasm between "the prosperity of the few and the misery of the many,"⁴⁰ he admitted conditions had improved, and this was nowhere more apparent than in the arts. New writers, previously unknown, were now considered seriously, among them, Boris Pilniak, Vsevolod Ivanov, and Konstantin Fedin.⁴¹ Serge was very much encouraged by the fact that these writers, none of whom were Communist Party members, and all "intense, impetuous, saturated with virile humanism and a critical spirit"⁴², were allowed to publish, and were greatly loved. Russian literature was being reborn after the years of Revolution and Civil War. The state of the arts was a sign of health that Serge observed in other spheres as well. The collapse which had seemed imminent upon Serge's departure a year earlier had not occurred, and although there

³⁸For Serge's views on the NEP, see previous chapter *infra*, pp.91-97.

³⁹Memoirs, pp. 147-148.

⁴⁰Serge, From Lenin to Stalin, p. 40.

⁴¹Memoirs, p. 165

⁴²Ibid.

were still signs of poverty, people were not dying of hunger. The Cheka terror had ended and faded into memory.

But the Comintern Executive seemed all too familiar. Signs of corruption, servility and bureaucratism were increasingly apparent in the functioning of the International. As to the meeting itself, Serge acutely observed the degeneration of the Comintern, though he didn't pay attention to the proceedings of the discussion, stating in the Memoirs, that he couldn't recall the nature of the deliberations at hand. This is rather surprising, as this was the meeting in which Radek delivered his famous "Schlageter Speech" which so confused the International delegates,⁴³ appealing as it did to rank and file Germans on the basis of nationalism, attempting to convince them that the communists alone were capable of fulfilling their desires and aspirations.⁴⁴

2.5 Back to Berlin: Russia, the Comintern and the German Revolution of 1923

Serge returned to Berlin in the summer of 1923 in time for the July-August mobilizations and strikes. Germany was in the midst of the crisis provoked by the French occupation of the Ruhr. Serge remained in Germany until the defeat of the (German) October revolution made the situation too dangerous for him to continue in his work. Serge's analysis and account of events in Germany are virtually the same in his Memoirs of 1941 and his articles written between 1923-26, more than fifteen years earlier. His LCI articles are journalistic and expose the machinations of German Social Democracy during 1923, the year of revolutionary crisis. There is also a great

⁴³See Rosmer, ibid., pp. 196-198.

⁴⁴See E.H. Carr, The Interregnum, 1923-1924, pp. 174-185, and Gruber, op.cit., p. 437. Serge mentions the 'Schlageter line' which Radek pushed through in the Memoirs, though not in conjunction with the meeting he (Serge) had attended. Memoirs, p.169.

deal of information on the disintegration of the German economy and its effects on the deteriorating situation of the German working class. In his later articles, Serge's post-mortem of the revolution puts forward the line of the Left Opposition in the Russian Party and Comintern, but is nuanced by his personal observations.

The conditions imposed by the Treaty of Versailles, which Serge described as "a noose around the German nation's neck"⁴⁵, destroyed the economy with the high social and economic costs of heavy reparations payments. The rich became 'self-seeking' speculators, and the masses became increasingly destitute. The crisis provoked by the reparations grew worse daily. Inflation was such that workers salaries, fixed at the beginning of the week, were worthless by payday.⁴⁶ Finally the Cuno government announced it could no longer pay the reparations, the country was bankrupt.

The political and economic disintegration of Germany caused widespread misery and hunger. The workers fled the democratic parties, and the ranks of the Communists and the fascists swelled. The German people, known for their orderliness, began to riot, and loiter, albeit in a disciplined fashion. Serge described rioting in front of bakery shops, yet observed proletarian discipline in the looting of a shoe shop, with the workers waiting in line for their turn to steal, and coming out 'scrupulously empty-handed' if there were no shoes to fit them.⁴⁷

The working class response to the disintegrating economy was mobilization. "Each day brought its windfall of strikes,

⁴⁵Serge, Memoirs, p. 169.

⁴⁶See R. Albert, "L'Allemagne en 1923: l'Inflation catastrophique," La Vie Ouvriere, Dec. 1925-June 1926, Nos. 310-370, and R. Albert, "Notes d'Allemagne," La Correspondance International, July - Nov. 1923.

⁴⁷Memoirs, p.169.

and every night the sinister silence echoed with revolver-shots."⁴⁸ The workers movement was on the march again. In a series of articles entitled "Au Seuil D'Une Revolution,"⁴⁹ Serge described the mood of the masses of Communists and nationalist students as one of "strike now" -- "Lochslagen."

Most of the political preconditions of a revolutionary situation were present in July-August 1923. As Trotsky pointed out, these included

"a crisis of existence for the nation and the state,...a crisis of the economy and especially of the country's finances; a parliamentary crisis; an utter collapse in the ruling class' confidence in itself; disintegration of social democracy and the trade unions; a spontaneous increase in the influence of the Communist Party; a turn by petty-bourgeois elements toward communism; a sharp decline in the morale of the fascists."⁵⁰

In August, a succession of strikes extended throughout German industry, which were political in character and continued until the existing Government of Cuno resigned. Stresemann then became Chancellor and pledged to put an end to the Ruhr crisis and to stabilize the mark. Stabilizing the mark would involve deep social cuts, however, in a polarized society that was already hungry.

2.6 "The Russian Model of Revolution"

The authority of the Bolsheviks on the basis of their successful October revolution established a Russian model of revolution which other Communist Parties sought to emulate.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 169.

⁴⁹R. Albert, Clarte, Nos. 52 and 53, Feb. 1 and 15, 1924.

⁵⁰Trotsky, "Through What Stage Are We Passing?" June 21, 1924, speech delivered to the Fifth All-Union Congress of Medical and Veterinary Workers, from Zapad i Vostok, collected in Leon Trotsky, The Challenge of the Left Opposition (1923-1925), Ed. Naomi Allen, Pathfinder Press, New York, 1975, pp.167-174.

The Bolsheviks themselves saw events in light of their own experience; thus Lenin characterized Germany's 1918 events as '1905'; the January 1919 clashes were Germany's 'July Days,' the Kapp Putsch was "the German Kornilov affair."⁵¹ While the German Communists were visibly weaker and less capable than their Russian counterparts, events were progressing according to a pattern.

The pattern of the 'classic' model of revolution shaped both the Soviet and German communists' perception of events. The centrality of the German Revolution to the survival of the Russian revolution caused the Bolsheviks to see too many similarities on the surface of German events with their own revolutionary development while ignoring the important signs that there were crucial differences in the subjective leadership. One writer went so far as to say the German Revolution of 1923 didn't exist as a possibility except in the heads of the Russian Left Opposition who depended on the German revolution for their survival.⁵² To the Russian revolutionaries, the vision of a Communist industrial Germany uniting with agrarian revolutionary Russia was a combination which would not only mean salvation to both countries, but could inspire the international working class to world revolution. Capitalist exploitation would be part of the past.

It was in the context of this vision that Radek pushed through his 'Schlageter line' to appeal to the rank and file nationalists to join with the Communists.⁵³ Curiously, Serge

⁵¹E. H. Carr, Volume 3, pp. 175-6.

⁵²Franz Borkenau, World Communism, pp 243-256.

⁵³Albert Schlageter was a young nationalist agitator who was shot by the French troops on the Ruhr on May 26, 1923. According to Carr, (The Interregnum, pp 170-176) Schlageter became a martyr and symbol to the nationalists; his name became a symbol of the revival of German national honour and
(continued...)

made no comment on the political content of Radek's Schlageter line. Was the appeal to the fascist rank and file a concession to nationalism? Serge obviously did not see the line as a move to the right, but rather a tactical maneuver leading to the contestation of power, and as such was part of the left's revolutionary action. Serge said of the Schlageter tactic: "It's playing with fire--all right let's play with fire!...Loschlagen! --Strike now!"⁵⁴

The German crisis was enormously exacerbated by events in Russia which were played out in the Comintern.⁵⁵ From May until August 1923, all actions of the German KPD and the Comintern were initiated by Radek.⁵⁶ Yet the strikes of August 1923 caught the German party and the Comintern politically unprepared. The workers movement had been ascendent throughout the summer, culminating with the August strikes. The Comintern shifted into action at the high point, and tried to escalate events when they were beginning to ebb.

⁵³ (...continued)

a battle-cry to "spur ... fresh deeds of violence against the French aggressor." p. 177. Radek's speech to the enlarged session of the Comintern Executive stated: "Today National Bolshevism means that everyone is penetrated with the feeling that salvation can be found only with the communists. We are today the only way out. The strong emphasis on the nation in Germany is a revolutionary act, like the emphasis on the nation in the colonies." International Presse-Korrespondenz, No. 103, June 21, 1923, p.; 869, quoted in Carr, op cit, p. 177.

⁵⁴ Memoirs, p. 169.

⁵⁵ The events of Germany in 1923 pointed to the crisis within the German Communist Party, the Comintern and the Soviet Party, already embroiled in factional disputes, brought about by NEP, the industrialization debates, the ebb of international revolution, Lenin's illness, and the succession of leadership, with the triumvirate of Zinoviev, Kamenev and Stalin organizing against Trotsky and indirectly against Lenin.

⁵⁶ Carr, Ibid, p. 174.

Brandler, the KPD leader, was called to Moscow to prepare the German revolution, and was kept there in endless debates until early October, while the KPD underwent a transformation from mass work to military preparations.

The Bolsheviks and the Comintern now went on the offensive, determining KPD policy from Moscow. The German Revolution's proposed date was set by the Bolsheviks to coincide with the 6th anniversary of the Russian October Revolution. This policy was much criticized, but Trotsky wrote an article defending it, entitled "Is It Possible to Fix a Definite Schedule for a Counter-Revolution or a Revolution?"⁵⁷ The article was translated into several languages.

Serge became alarmed when the date of the insurrection was fixed from Moscow, while in Germany he witnessed stocks of arms being seized every day, and the mood of the masses passing from urgent expectation and 'insurgent enthusiasm' to 'weary resignation.' Serge wrote Souvarine in Moscow in order to convey to the Executive Committee of the International, that "unless the Party's initiative joins with the spontaneous movement of the masses, it is doomed beforehand."⁵⁸

Radek had also wired Moscow saying that the German masses were not ready. Zinoviev and Bukharin spurred the Germans on. Trotsky at first said he needed to learn more about Germany before expressing his opinion, but then decided Germany was ripe for revolution, and proposed planning the insurrection in advance.⁵⁹ Although Radek and Serge had differences with

⁵⁷The article appears in The First Five Years of the Communist International, Volume 2, by Leon Trotsky, Monad Press, 1972, pp. 347-354.

⁵⁸Memoirs, p. 170.

⁵⁹Deutscher, Vol. 2, pp. 142-145. Deutscher notes that Brandler balked, feeling, as he put it, that he was not the German Lenin, and asked the Politburo to assign Trotsky to
(continued...)

Trotsky on this score, they were buried in face of the fight against Stalin, in which they stood together in the Left Opposition.

2.7 The "Aborted" German October

The plan decided on was artificial, trying to force events from the outside. Although Trotsky and Radek had serious misgivings about the divisions within the KPD between Brandler (who Trotsky supported) and Maslow and Fischer,-- divisions over the decision that the moment for the seizure of power had arrived -- they nevertheless believed the revolution in Germany had to be directed with bold and decisive action.⁶⁰

Uncertainty at the highest levels in the Comintern gave way to a plan of action. KPD members Brandler, Heckert and Bottcher were to enter the Social Democratic Dresden cabinet, which, according to Comintern directives, was seen as the springboard for revolution.⁶¹ The Communists were to use their influence from within the government to arm the workers. Red Saxony and Thuringia were to lead the insurrection. Serge lived with the workers and youth who prepared to fight; some were veterans of November 1918, and January 1919, old Spartakists who lived through "the murder of ... Karl and Rosa,

⁵⁹(...continued)

lead the insurrection. Instead of Trotsky the Politburo assigned Radek and Pyatokov. Serge was part of their entourage. Had Trotsky gone and led a successful revolution, he would have been the leader of both the Russian and German revolutions and consequently too powerful for Stalin. On the other hand, had Trotsky been killed leading an unsuccessful German revolution, he would have become a martyr, like Che Guevara. It was better for Stalin to keep Trotsky in the Soviet Union.

⁶⁰Carr, Interregnum, p. 218, and Deutscher, Vol. 2, pp. 142-145.

⁶¹Serge, Memoirs, p. 171.

the dictatorship of the man of blood, Gustav Noske." He noted these men were ready to do anything they were asked.⁶²

There were several reasons the Comintern's plan was clumsy; haste, indecision, and amateurish preparations combined in a disastrous mixture. The political premise was correct, but the plan was based on insufficient and outdated information. Trotsky had understood since 1918 the crisis in revolutionary leadership, the famous subjective factor that was decisive in a revolutionary situation. Serge had agreed with Trotsky yet added there was also a 'crisis of popular consciousness' not to mention an already bureaucratized International.⁶³ Taken together, an essential ingredient for a successful revolution was absent.

The Comintern analysis of the German situation had been outstripped by events. Conditions in October were not as favorable as they had been in July; the social crisis was less acute, and the stabilization of the mark had eased the economic situation. Deutscher said the political situation was thus calmer. Borkenau saw the situation as anything but calm, but blamed the Communists for not realizing they lacked support. In his view, the drift of disaffected social democratic workers was more to the right than to the left; he cited a decline in trade union membership as proof that workers were withdrawing from politics. Gruber said the German KPD should have known the situation better, especially with regard to the strength and inclinations of the fascists, and he criticized the Russians for seeing too many "homologues to their October Revolution." Carr also wrote that although the situation in Germany 'had lost none of its tenseness', the underlying political conviction of the revolutionary situation in Germany was more illusory than real, based on a

⁶²Ibid, p. 172.

⁶³Ibid., p. 174.

miscalculation of the revolutionary consciousness of the working class.⁶⁴

The German KPD Zentral had failed to arouse the masses and prepare them for insurrection. The arsenals were empty. Seeing this at the last moment, the insurrection was called off by the Russian military experts including Piatokov, but word did not get to Hamburg,⁶⁵ where 300 disciplined and courageous communists took over the city and found themselves isolated and doomed. A bloody sequel took place there, as the communists rose and fought for four days.⁶⁶

Serge said there were "few of us who realized the full extent of the defeat in the first moments".⁶⁷ Hitler staged his abortive coup in Munich on November 9. Although the putsch failed, Serge did not underestimate Hitler's potential. In fact, one salient feature of Serge's articles in La Correspondance Internationale, and Bulletin Communiste for the year 1923 was his appreciation of and attention to the significance of the fascist danger.⁶⁸ In his later article in

⁶⁴Deutscher, Vol. 2, pp. 142-144, Borkenau, World Communism, pp. 247-8, Gruber, International Communism in the Era of Lenin, p. 441, Carr, Interregnum, pp. 210-215.

⁶⁵ Because as Carr wrote of an inexplicable tragic blunder, in which Thalmann and Remmele, two members of the KPD Central Committee left the conference of workers organizations at Chemnitz before it ended, under the impression that the insurrection's success was assured, and gave the order in Hamburg for the rising to begin. Had they stayed to the end of the conference, they would have received word that the insurrection was called off. Interregnum, p.p. 221-222.

⁶⁶Gruber, op. cit, p. 442n.

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸See articles signed 'R. Albert' in LCI, no. 61 (31 July 1923), no. 63 (7 August 1923), no. 77 (28 Sept 1923), no. 78, (2 Oct. 1923), no. 89 (9 Nov. 1923), no. 90 (13 Nov. 1923); and in BC, no. 41 (11 Oct. 1923) and no. 47 (22 Nov. 1923).

La Vie Ouvriere⁶⁹, Serge explained that German capitalists did not yet need Hitler, as they had been able to stabilize the situation, but they would keep him in reserve, should the crisis flare up again.

The defeat of the German revolution paved the way not only for Hitler, but also for Stalin. The failure yet again of revolution in Europe left the Bolsheviks isolated and in turmoil. The Russian Party crisis entirely dominated the German debate. Its effects were felt throughout the Comintern. The evaluation of the KPD in the post-mortem of the German 'fiasco,' as Carr termed it, became a battleground in the struggle within the Russian Politburo between Trotsky, Radek and Piatokov on one side versus Stalin, Zinoviev and Kamenev on the other. Trotsky wrote seven years later,

"The internal discussion in the Russian Communist Party did not lead to a system of groups until the events in Germany in the fall of 1923. The economic and political processes in the USSR were molecular in character and had a comparatively slow tempo. The events of 1923 in Germany gave the measure of the differences on the scale of that gigantic class struggle. It was then and on that basis that the Russian Opposition was formed."⁷⁰

The deliberations on the German question marked the first time Stalin had participated in the life of the Comintern. His attitude was revealed six years later when Brandler (expelled from the International) sought to clear himself by publishing Stalin's letter to Zinoviev and Bukharin, opposing the insurrection: "It is in our interests that the fascists should attack first. ... Moreover, according to all information, the fascists are weak in Germany."⁷¹ Zinoviev

⁶⁹R. Albert, La Vie ouvriere, No. 60, 1926.

⁷⁰"Greetings to La Verite," Writings of Leon Trotsky, 1930. Quoted in Trotsky, The Challenge of the Left Opposition (1923-1925), p. 163.

⁷¹This account is to be found in Rosmer's excellent book, Moscow Under Lenin, Monthly Review Press, 1971, pp. 208-209.

hesitated, but tended to favor the insurrection. Brandler was opposed, but was forced to assume leadership of the action. Later Stalin and Zinoviev blamed Brandler in an attempt to clear the International of responsibility.

In the wake of defeat, recriminations and scapegoating went on between the German Party, the Comintern and the Bolsheviks. Ruth Fischer and Maslow lined up opportunistically with Stalin and Zinoviev, Trotsky supported Brandler, and everyone agreed that the revolutionary leadership had been woefully inadequate.⁷² Serge concurred, but begged the question of the working class: were they revolutionary? Serge's account is loaded with quotes telling us they weren't: they were too 'respectable,' too moderate. Characteristically, Serge's analysis begins and ends with the actual condition and political consciousness of the working class.

The Weimar Republic survived the October and November crises of 1923, said Serge, only through the weight of the inertia of the masses. The bulk of the masses were uninvolved; the unemployed sold themselves for a crust of bread to the Nazis, the Social Democratic leaders were too invested in a crumbling social system, while its workers were too frightened of revolution. In the ensuing search for scapegoats, Serge noted that out of defeat came

"the lying, the suppression, the demoralizing discipline that ruins consciences. Nobody talked about the basic fault. The whole Party lived on the involuntary bluff of functionaries whose first concern was not to contradict their superiors."⁷³

Misinformation had accumulated, passing through a hierarchy of functionaries and secretaries, until the KPD CC could say to

⁷²Peter Sedgwick, in "Victor Serge and Socialism," International Socialism 14, 1963, says "everybody ... demonstrated the crying inadequacy of the leadership of everybody else..." p. 20.

⁷³Memoirs, pp. 174-5.

the International that they were prepared, but in reality they were only prepared on paper.⁷⁴ Part of the problem resulted from the chain of command which went through the Russian Politburo, the Comintern and the German Party. The consequences were to create conditions for further bureaucratization. Serge argued in his article in Clarte that the disease of bureaucratization had its hand in the bungling ineptitude of the German fiasco. The German Party had not only allowed all initiative to come from Moscow, but remained passive while a revolutionary situation developed under their noses. When they should have been developing connections with the mass struggle, the German communists concentrated on gathering arms -- and this they did fictitiously; more on paper than in fact.⁷⁵ Accepting a date for the insurrection in this situation was yet another indication of the bureaucratic isolation from reality which paralyzed them in the end.

The German events coincided with the beginning of sharp factional strife in the Bolshevik Party. The Platform of the 46⁷⁶ appeared in the same month of the German defeat, as well

⁷⁴Serge, Memoirs, pp. 174-5, Gruber, Op. Cit., p. 441.

⁷⁵The inflation of arms gathering on paper, performed by bureaucratized militants who wished to look good to their superiors was then covered by the superiors to look good to their superiors, until it looked on paper as if the Party was ready for insurrection, when in fact they were not. R. Albert, "Au Seuil D'Une Revolution," Clarte, Feb. 15, 1924, p. 97. Serge's analysis of the crippling behavior of bureaucratism and the consequent effects of acting with inaccurate information in the German events were to find their reflection in the subsequent developments in the Soviet Union.

⁷⁶A Manifesto signed by Preobrazhensky, Serebryakov, Breslav, and 43 other leading members of the party, issued on October 15, 1923. The Manifesto attacked the gulf separating the "secretarial hierarchy" and the "quiet folk" or "general mass of the Party" and complained of the ossification of the party leadership; and declared that the "casual, unconsidered
(continued...)

as Trotsky's two letters which opened the great period of debate and factional struggle within the Russian Party. The German affair was inextricably involved in the crisis in the Russian Party and the Comintern. Radek, a Left Oppositionist (with Trotsky) came up against Zinoviev's power in the Comintern. Members of Comintern sections took positions in the debate, to the growing alarm of the Stalin, Zinoviev and Kamenev, who worried that foreign leaders might side with the Left Opposition. In fact, Radek reminded the Politburo that he was responsible for his actions in Germany not to the Politburo of the Russian Party, but to the World Congress of the Comintern, of which the Russian Party was a section like the others.⁷⁷ The question of dominance of the Stalin faction in the Comintern was thus acutely posed.

The well-documented debate in the Comintern on the German revolution opposed two differing assessments of the defeat. One took the view that the German proletariat had not been ready to seize power when the call was made, the other maintained that conditions had been ripe for revolution but the moment had been lost because of the crisis of revolutionary leadership. Serge's assessment fell somewhere between the two; he saw a crisis both in revolutionary leadership and in popular consciousness.⁷⁸ He did not side with Zinoviev or Stalin. Now that another opportunity for

⁷⁶(...continued)

and unsystematic character of the decisions of the central committee..." had brought the country into a "grave economic crisis." The Manifesto, or 'Platform of the 46' is reproduced in full in E.H. Carr, The Interregnum 1923-1924, pp.367-373.

⁷⁷Trinadtsataya Konferentsiya Rossiiskoi Kommunisticheskoi Partii (Bol'shevikov) (1924), p. 173, cited in Carr, The Interregnum 1923-1924, p. 236.

⁷⁸ The crisis of popular consciousness and the bureaucratization of the International were both expressions of what Trotsky called the crisis of revolutionary leadership. Thus Serge's view was a more nuanced version of Trotsky's.

world revolution failed, the inward looking faction ('socialism in one country') came to the fore. Serge was well aware of the consequences for the Comintern and the Russian revolution, and he alluded to them in his Clarte articles and Memoirs.

Serge left Berlin for Vienna by way of Prague with his wife Liuba and son Vlady the same day (Nov. 9, 1923) that General von Seekt took power to restore order. At the last moment the Soviet Embassy left them to fend for themselves, deciding to neither compromise itself, nor take any risks by helping illegal agents. Serge had lived in difficult circumstances without money or proper papers for two years, but had experienced his third revolution.

2.8 Watching and Waiting in Vienna: 1923-1925

From Vienna, Serge followed events in the Soviet Union, the Comintern, and the turbulent Balkans. These included the death of Lenin; Zinoviev's Estonian fiasco (Zinoviev, Serge said, was called "Lenin's biggest mistake."⁷⁹); the Georgian affair, in which Stalin had shown his hand through Ordzhonikidze (Serge called him [Ordzhonikidze] "an honest and scrupulous man tormented by recurrent crises of conscience"); and Bulgaria, still 'pregnant with revolution.'

Austria itself was a peaceful country governed by enlightened Social Democrats who were engaged in building workers housing and biding for time in the knowledge that their powerful neighbors' influence (Germany, Italy and Hungary) would decide their future. Serge arrived with his diplomatic passport, and while enjoying Vienna's sweet music, preoccupied himself with international questions.

The years of Serge's sojourn in Vienna, 1923-1925, coincided with the years of watching and waiting throughout the Comintern and to a certain extent within the Soviet Union

⁷⁹Memoirs, p. 177.

itself. Vienna had become the crossroads of the International, where leading international revolutionaries were either living or spending time. Serge had the opportunity to converse and discuss with many of them, and through his recollections of these conversations reveal what they were thinking privately -- thoughts they would not express publicly. Once again, Serge found himself in a nerve center of political activity.

In Vienna, Serge watched the deterioration of the Soviet Party and Comintern, stricken with a bureaucratic cancer. He associated with some of the finest revolutionary minds of the day, and sketched thumbnail portraits of them in the *Memoirs*. He studied Freud and Marx, associated with Lukacs⁸⁰ and Gramsci,⁸¹ both in Vienna, and continued in his 'non-

⁸⁰Of Lukacs, Serge wrote: "Lukacs was a philosopher steeped in the works of Hegel, Marx, and Freud, and possessing a free-ranging and rigorous mind. He was engaged in writing a number of outstanding books which were never to see the light of day. In him I saw a first-class brain which could have endowed Communism with a true intellectual greatness if it had developed as a social movement instead of degenerating into a movement in solidarity with an authoritarian Power. Lukacs' thinking led him to a totalitarian vision of Marxism within which he united all aspects of human life; his theory of the Party could be taken as either superb or disastrous, depending on the circumstances. For example, he considered that since history could not be divorced from politics, it should be written by historians in the service of the Central Committee." *Memoirs*, p. 187.

⁸¹Serge described Gramsci as "an industrious and Bohemian exile, late to bed and late to rise Gramsci fitted awkwardly into the humdrum of day-to-day existence, losing his way at night in familiar streets, taking the wrong train, indifferent to the comfort of his lodgings and the quality of his meals; but intellectually, he was absolutely alive. Trained intuitively in the dialectic, quick to uncover falsehood and transfix it with the sting of irony, he viewed the world with an exceptional clarity. ... When the crisis in Russia began to worsen, Gramsci did not want to be broken in the process, so he had himself sent back to Italy by his party a fascist jail kept him outside the operation of those
(continued...)

existent' capacity as representative of the Soviet press. Of his life at that point, Serge wrote:

"All we lived for was activity integrated into history; we were interchangeable; we could immediately see the repercussions of affairs in Russia upon affairs in Germany and the Balkans; we felt linked with our comrades who, in pursuit of the same ends as we, perished or else scored some success at the other end of Europe. None of us had, in the bourgeois sense of the word, any personal existence: we changed our names, our posting and our work at the Party's need; we had just enough to live on without real material discomfort, and we were not interested in making money, or following a career, or producing a literary heritage, or leaving a name behind us; we were interested solely in the difficult business of reaching socialism."⁸²

Rarely has the life of a revolutionary been evoked so eloquently. Serge had the unique ability and talent to capture the mood of what life was really like, or what a person was like (in his remarkable thumbnail sketches), to document reality in a creative literary style. Above all, he never forgot that politics and history were composed of people, and that these individuals' characters were connected to their public activities. How else could a paragraph describing the lack of personal existence of a revolutionary be so immediately personal?

Of the Russians Serge knew in Vienna, he said they managed to "keep their plain integrity and abundant

⁸¹(...continued)

factional struggles whose consequence nearly everywhere was the elimination of the militants of his generation. Our years of darkness were his years of stubborn resistance." Memoirs, p. 186-187. I quote these perceptions of Serge because of their extraordinary quality in themselves, and because they reveal aspects of these revolutionary figures unavailable elsewhere.

⁸²Memoirs, p. 177.

optimism."⁸³ These were revolutionaries whose usefulness had been exhausted but had been given sinecures abroad, where they could observe first hand the decay of the bourgeois world, and where their voices would not be heard. Included among these revolutionaries were Adolf Abramovich Joffe, just back from China and Japan, who appeared to Serge as a "wise physician, almost affluent in his appearance and almost comical in his gravity, who had been summoned to the bedside of a dying patient."⁸⁴ The others were Dr. Goldstein, "old" Kozlovsky, and Yuri Kotziubinsky, with whom Serge shared confidences. Kotziubinsky had been a hero in the Civil War, along with Evgenia Bosch and Yuri Piatakov. Serge also met Angelica Balabanova again, Lukacs, Gramsci⁸⁵, Bela Kun ("a remarkably odious figure ... the incarnation of intellectual inadequacy, uncertainty of will, and authoritarian corruption"⁸⁶).

They had almost no contact with Austrian Social Democracy and the Communist Party, which had divided in two, with only 100 members in each group. Although Austro-Marxism had produced fine minds, and organized one million proletarians, it had failed to take power three times in ten years through "its sobriety, prudence, and bourgeois moderation."⁸⁷

⁸³ Ibid., p. 181.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 182.

⁸⁵ Gramsci had known of Serge before they met in Vienna. Gramsci had translated Serge's Lenin 1917 and some of his Clarte articles and published them in his paper L'Ordine Nuovo. Serge's relations with Gramsci are discussed by Sergio Caprioglio and Elsa Fubini, editors of the Italian edition of Gramsci's prison letters. Gramsci also alludes to Serge in a letter dated September 13, 1931. See Antonio Gramsci, Lettere del carcere, S. Caprioglio and E. Fubini, ed. (Turin, 1965), p. 487n. Cited in Greeman, op. cit., p. 344.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 187.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 188-189.

Serge spent his time discussing the fate of the Russian revolution, the Comintern and the world situation with his friends, and writing.⁸⁸ He noted that he and Gramsci had commented that the 250,000 new militants, recently recruited to the Bolshevik Party couldn't have been worth much if they had waited for the death of Lenin to enter the party.⁸⁹ With Lukacs, he had discussed whether or not revolutionaries who had been condemned to death should commit suicide.⁹⁰

Serge wrote of the impending fascist danger in Austria in the French La Vie Ouvriere in 1925, which became "an ineffectual pamphlet" in Russia. Serge wrote that the Austrian working class could survive only so long as Weimar Germany existed; with the collapse of the Weimar Republic, Austria was doomed.⁹¹ Serge's journalism in this period dealt mainly with questions of international solidarity, (the campaign against the terror in Spain waged against Serge's old comrades; against the White terror in 'Bulgaria ruled by the knife'⁹²) or cultural topics, in which he was less frustrated with following the official line, as both Comintern functionary and Bolshevik Party member.⁹³

⁸⁸He began his first novel, Men In Prison, wrote a biography of Lenin, Lenine 1917, wrote on culture and revolution in a series of articles in Clarte, which later formed the backbone of a small book Serge produced called Literature and Revolution, published in 1932.

⁸⁹Referring to the 'Lenin levy'. Ibid, p. 186.

⁹⁰Lukacs had decided when he was imprisoned that he had no right to suicide as a Central Committee member, charged with setting an example. Ibid., p. 188.

⁹¹Victor Serge, "Le Fascisme en Autriche," La Vie ouvriere, October and November 1925.

⁹²Memoirs, p. 190.

⁹³Greeman, op. cit., p. 304.

2.9 Writings from Vienna

As we have noted Serge was fairly disillusioned with the bureaucratic cancer and nationalist focus of both the Soviet Party and the subservient Comintern, and had already thrown his lot in with the Left Opposition. Serge's political doubts were reflected in his writings in this period, albeit in an Aesopian fashion. As Richard Greeman pointed out, Serge wisely avoided direct political questions in his writings, as that would have called into question his loyalty to the Bolshevik Party, of which he was still a member.⁹⁴

Serge wrote a biography of Lenin, just after his death in 1924, which on the surface looks like a typical product of the cult of Lenin which followed his death. Serge's assignment, to write a biography of Lenin for the French reading public, did not seem unusual, given that Serge had translated Lenin's State and Revolution into French, and had worked in the Lenin Institute translating Lenin's Collected Works.⁹⁵ Serge had known Lenin personally, and his wife had been Lenin's stenographer in 1921.⁹⁶ The news of Lenin's death came to Serge in a train in Austria; he recalled overhearing the conversation of two Austrian petty-bourgeois' about the death of a revolutionary, and Serge was overwhelmed thinking of Lenin's remarkable human achievements.⁹⁷ Serge quoted Andres Nin, who said that the unity of the Party had depended on this

⁹⁴Greeman, op. cit., p. 304.

⁹⁵See Chapter ?, *infra*, p. . Serge later was allowed to continue his translations of Lenin in the Lenin Institute, but he was closely supervised by "experts charged with the task of uncovering possible sabotage in the disposition of semicolons." His name was also removed from the published volumes. Memoirs, p. 273.

⁹⁶According to Serge's son Vlady, interviewed in Mexico City, Jan. 1986.

⁹⁷Memoirs, p. 176.

'shadow of a man, no more than that' and that afterwards, 'there's going to be a riot.'⁹⁸

The significance of Serge's biography of Lenin, is not so much its actual content but the context: it was written from Vienna, after the defeat of Germany, and thus world revolution, in the context of the Stalin's rising star, just now rising above the Triumvers, an ascent which utilized methods alien to makers of the Russian revolution, and unfortunately only a preview of methods to be used in the near future. The book reads like an official account, and is perhaps Serge's least inspiring text.⁹⁹ Yet underneath what reads like a mediocre and unimaginative piece of official propaganda, Serge was able to analyze Lenin's role in the revolution in such a way as to make an implicit criticism of the official line of Stalin's leadership. Without understanding the context in which Serge wrote the book, however, its oppositional significance is not immediately apparent.

Describing Lenin in the year of the revolution, Serge stressed two points: Lenin's internationalism and view of the Russian Revolution as but "a strong impulse to the international socialist movement"¹⁰⁰; and Lenin's commitment to the role of the masses in the revolutionary process and construction of the workers state. Considering Stalin's policies and actions, the book is a veiled attack on the direction of the Party in 1924-25.

⁹⁸Ibid.

⁹⁹Richard Greeman calls it 'pedestrian', but says the pedestrian quality points to Serge's objective position (indeed that of the entire Left Opposition) as a loyal member under the yoke of the party.

¹⁰⁰Victor Serge, Lenin 1917, originally published by Librairie de Travail, Paris, no date; quotes here from Spanish edition, Ediciones Transicion, Mexico, 1977, p. 26.

Serge followed the course of the year 1917, and demonstrated Lenin's decisive role. Lenin to Serge was the embodiment of 'thought as action' and the 'absolute harmony between intelligence and will.'¹⁰¹ Serge underscored Lenin's understanding of the role of workers in taking power and constructing socialism and in this sense the whole book is an attack of Stalin and the troika, who showed contempt for the masses and ruled by dictatorial fiat. Serge was able, by emphasizing Lenin's understanding of the role of the organs of workers democracy in advancing the mass struggle, and without referring at all to the struggles following Lenin's death, to accentuate the democratic side of Lenin, making the book an oppositional text.

Serge was also able to attack Comintern policy in the German revolution of 1923 in his book on Lenin, without mentioning Germany or the Comintern.¹⁰² Under the heading "Marxism and Insurrection," Serge quoted Lenin on the 'art of insurrection.' Lenin wrote that a revolution, if it was to be successful could neither be a conspiracy nor a plot, but must be supported by the advanced class, and by a revolutionary plan of the people. "The insurrection must be supported at its point of inflection of the growing revolution, at the moment in which the activity of the masses reaches its highest level, and in which the doubts of the masses following the enemy also reaches their high point..."¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Serge, Lenin 1917, p. 24.

¹⁰² Serge invoked Lenin to attack both the German Party and the Comintern for the pre-planned insurrection, which was artificially imposed on a working class with an inadequate and insufficient revolutionary leadership.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 60. The Spanish text reads: "La insurreccion debe apoyarse en el punto de inflexion de la revolucion creciente, en el momento en que la actividad de las masas alcanza su mas alto grado, en que tambien las dudas en las filas enemigas alcanza el suyo..."

Serge on Soviet cultural trends and the role of literature in revolution

As was to be the case throughout Serge's life in periods of proscription of political activity, imprisonment, or in this case, political censorship due to Party discipline, Serge shifted his attention to literary questions, or wrote novels. Serge was first and foremost a political animal, and it was only when he couldn't participate politically that he turned to literary activity. The Vienna period was one of watching and waiting, as the real center of political activity was raging within the Soviet Party itself. Serge did not take part in Austrian political life. His attention returned to literature again after 1928, when he was expelled from the Bolshevik Party and was later imprisoned. This time however, Serge broadened his literary activity, becoming a novelist himself.

Serge's articles on Russian cultural and artistic life, which were published in Clarte and La Correspondance Internationale mark his entry into the field of literary criticism, to which he would return in 1932, when he published a little book called Litterature et Revolution.

Serge wrote some 25 articles in the period 1922-1926 which chronicle culture in the Soviet Union. He profiled the leading Soviet artists, and by way of their work, discussed the trends and conditions of culture in post-revolution Soviet society. These articles document Serge's impressions and analyses of the brief cultural renaissance during the Civil War and under NEP. Serge was no stranger to the Soviet literary scene, although he hadn't yet become a novelist. It will be recalled that Serge had associated with literary artists during the Civil War and had belonged to the Volfila group.¹⁰⁴ Serge had kept up with their work, and their fate. He noted many of their suicides in the post 1925 period.

¹⁰⁴See Chapter 2 *infra*, p. 96.

Serge had not only interpreted the works of these early Soviet artists for the French reading public, he also translated some of their works: Andre Biely's "Christ est ressuscite"¹⁰⁵ and Gladkov's Le Ciment.

Although Serge was a convinced Bolshevik, he was not in the least dogmatic. He associated with Christian and symbolist writers, and certainly did not think that only revolutionary writers should be regarded. Serge appreciated creative genius, whether it was revolutionary or reactionary, materialist or mystic. He placed writers and artists in a special category and put the rights of artistic self-expression above politics and the political struggle itself.¹⁰⁶

In his chronicle of literary trends in the Soviet Union, Serge traced the continuity of pre-revolution literary traditions in the current cultural scene. He examined the role of literature in the revolution and vice versa. In an article called "Les Ecrivains russes et la Revolution"¹⁰⁷ Serge discussed the revolutionary content of the "metaphysical anguish and mystical resurrection"¹⁰⁸ of Chekhov, Gorky, Korolenko and others and the importance of maintaining their revolutionary idealism. The ending of capitalist exploitation for Serge was never simply an end in itself, but only the means by which creative expression could blossom and flower. It was a necessary beginning. Serge wrote,

"...les revolutionnaires ont besoin de la comprendre et de l'aimer. Car la question qu'elle

¹⁰⁵A. Biely, "Christ est ressuscite," Clarte, No. 27, 1923, p. 77, translator Victor Serge.

¹⁰⁶Richard Greeman, op cit, pp. 310-314, discusses Serge's appreciation of Biely, Gumilev and Blok, and his struggle for the preservation of their artistic rights.

¹⁰⁷Published in Clarte, 1922, pp. 387-390.

¹⁰⁸Greeman, op. cit., p. 320.

pose denote l'éternelle insatisfaction, la repugnance du bonheur médiocre, l'aspiration à sortir du cycle de la vie végétative ou purement animale de tant d'esclaves et de tant de maîtres, pour monter enfin à la vie humaine dont la justification ne peut évidemment résider que dans des affirmations d'énergies supérieures qui sont l'amour, l'intelligence et la volonté créatrices.¹⁰⁹

The revolution was to be measured in human, spiritual and cultural terms as well as economic ones, and artists would be evaluated by their ability to insert themselves and their art within the context of the revolution. Having defined his position on art and revolution, Serge then examined the novelists and poets. He wrote that Mayakovsky had created a unique revolutionary work with his poem "150,000,000" which was new in both form and content. Serge lauded Mayakovsky, the futurist, and the Christian poets, leaving the least praise for the Communist poets. He finished by discussing the limits of "proletcult,"¹¹⁰ anticipating the literary debates that seem to surface in every revolution on whether or not a proletarian culture could exist. This was hotly debated in the late 20s and early 30s in the Soviet Union, ending with the choking of creativity under Stalin and the birth of Soviet socialist realism.

Serge wrote a series for Clarte on the "Vie Intellectuelle en Russie des Soviets" in which he first described Russian cultural conditions and trends, and then took up the question of 'revolutionary culture'. Serge wrote

¹⁰⁹"Les Ecrivains russes et la Revolution," Clarte, 1922, p. 388.

¹¹⁰The proletcults had emerged at the height of the Civil War years of 1918-1921, battling for a proletarian culture, founding circles in small towns, covering city walls with posters, putting on plays, producing poets, setting up courses, elaborating theories, and founding an international committee. See Victor Serge, "Is a Proletarian Literature Possible," a translation of Clarte, no. 12, March 1, 1925, in Yale French Studies, p. 137.

that the weight of the older, pre-revolutionary artists and their ideas still dominated the newer revolutionary artists, struggling to establish new movements. A parallel existed between the new revolutionary artists and the new nationalized industries, both struggling against older established ways. The new artists had absorbed the dynamism of the revolution, but were impressionable and unformed. Serge did not consider these artists revolutionary yet, because they hadn't developed an "architecture of ideas" about the revolution, and although they were imbued with the creative energy unleashed by the revolution, their understanding of the revolutionary process lacked depth. "Ils en ont fort bien observe les petits aspects: ils n'en ont pas penetre la loi profonde."¹¹¹

These writers were in fact closer to populism than to proletarian culture; they spoke of 'the people,' an imprecise term more used by liberals and populists than revolutionary Marxists. Serge explained that the revolutionary Marxist intellectuals had been too busy to write fiction, and those who wrote showed the influence of NEP. Writers did not stand above society and its movement; they developed with the revolution and its stresses and strains.¹¹² There was no time to have developed a proletarian culture in the space of a few short years, especially when considered against the time it had taken to generate bourgeois culture. Within this theoretical framework, Serge turned his attention to individual writers, including Pilniak, Libedinsky, Ivanov, Tikhonov, Serafimovich, and Mayakovsky.¹¹³

¹¹¹"La Nouvel ecrivain et la Nouvelle litterature," Clarte, 1923, pp. 160.

¹¹²Ibid.

¹¹³ These writers were profiled in Clarte, nos. 36, 1923, ("Boris Pilniak"), Vol. 1923, ("La Semaine" de I. Lebedinsky"), no. 56, 1924, ("Vsevolod Ivanov,") and No. 74, 1925, ("La Litterature epique de la Revolution: N. Tikhonov et Serafimovitch,").

Serge's examination of Mayakovsky celebrated the young futurist poet's form and style, and the vigor brought to it by the Bolshevik revolution. But according to Greeman,¹¹⁴ Serge's critique of Mayakovsky¹¹⁵ is the critique of a classicist -- according to Serge, the poet lacked equilibrium, he used too much hyperbole, and was excessively individualistic, too iconoclastic, and futuristic only in a superficial way. Mayakovsky was still influenced by the decadence of pre-revolutionary poetry, and had not succeeded in expressing his individuality without depending on old myths. Serge said Walt Whitman had succeeded lyrically where Mayakovsky failed. Serge decided Mayakovsky had the stamp of the old in him, but insisted it could be nothing else since the new culture could not be created overnight, but would come only after creative individuals had assimilated the consciousness, belief patterns and ideology of the new society.¹¹⁶ Serge concluded that rigorous Marxist criticism of culture must develop with total freedom for artistic expression, to support the conditions necessary for the germination of a new culture in this transition period.

In the penultimate article Serge wrote in the Clarte series, "'Une Litterature proletarienne est-elle possible?" Serge discussed some of the new literary groups and their

¹¹⁴Richard Greeman, op. cit., p. 334.

¹¹⁵Victor Serge, "Mayakovsky," Clarte, Vol. 1924, 504-508.

¹¹⁶Mayakovsky was very annoyed by Serge's Clarte article, asking him, "Why do you say that my futurism is no more than Past-ism?" Serge answered, "Because your hyperboles and shouts, and even your boldest images, are all saturated with the past in its most wearisome aspects. And you write 'In men's souls / Vapor and electricity....' Do you really think that's good enough? Surely this is materialism of a peculiarly antiquated variety?" Serge said they parted cordially but Mayakovsky became so official that Serge never met him again and most of the friends he had in his youth also dropped him. Memoirs, p. 267-268.

journals. He considered Na postu the best and most characteristic example of the new reviews: it was rigorous yet easy to read, clear and consistent ideologically, a journal of "demolition and savage attack" as well as of criticism. Citing examples of its criticism and style, Serge quoted Sosnovsky who had attacked Gorky's bitterness and defense of old intellectuals as "the ex-falcon turned hedgehog." The review criticized Voloshin, ("the poetic counterrevolution"), Pilniak, Ehrenburg and Nikitin as calumniators of the Revolution. The State library directors were criticized for clumsy editing, Kollantai for her books on free love; even Lunarcharsky's theater came under fire, as did Mayakovsky's claims of a proletarian Futurism. Serge said the 'mutual attacks by Bolsheviks' were a joy to read.¹¹⁷ The review had problems too, especially when at the Moscow Association of Proletarian writers meeting in 1923 it demanded that the Party undertake "the rational and tactical leadership in art."¹¹⁸

Nikolai Bukharin entered the debate with the most sensible answers, wrote Serge, proposing that since the country was 95% peasant, the literature should be peasant, and above all, should not be restricted, nor regulated by the State. Proletarian writers had to "win literary authority for themselves" by freely competing with other creative movements.¹¹⁹ Bukharin was the only Politburo sponsor of the idea of a separate proletarian culture, but vigorously opposed "methods of mechanical coercion" in achieving the new literature. Writers organizations should not be modeled on the

¹¹⁷Victor Serge, "Is a proletarian literature possible?" translated from Clarte 12, March 1, 1925, and published in Yale French Studies, 1967, p. 138-139.

¹¹⁸Ibid., p. 140.

¹¹⁹Krasnaia nov', No. 4, 1925, pp. 271-2, quoted in Stephen Cohen, Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution, Oxford University Press, 1973, p. 205.

Party or Army and only a multiplicity of writers organizations would allow artists the wide latitude they needed for artistic creation. Bukharin declared, "Let there be 1000 organizations, 2000 organizations; let there be alongside MAPP and VAPP as many circles and organizations as you like."¹²⁰ The literary dispute did not yet relate to the political tensions and divisions within the Party.

Serge criticized the boring works of gifted young writers who were so "theory-obsessed" and "hamstrung by their preconceptions" that their literature failed altogether. Serge attacked the Association of Proletarian Writers for asking writers to "not imitate bourgeois art forms, but to surpass them to create new forms" and to write only monumental works on proletarian life. These pronouncements lacked insight and a grounding in concrete reality. Serge asked, how could a young writer from a workshop surpass the expertise of bourgeois art methods?¹²¹

Serge based his ideas on Trotsky's Literature and Revolution, (Serge called Trotsky's work "definitive"¹²²) in which Trotsky denied that a proletarian literature could exist; the new culture would be universal, not proletarian, since the proletarian dictatorship would give birth to a classless society. During the transition period of the proletarian dictatorship, there wouldn't be time for a genuine culture to develop, since the conditions for the development of intellectual culture -- normal production, high technology, well-being, leisure and time -- would be more appropriate to the communist society that would supplant the proletarian dictatorship. Even the term "proletarian culture' could be

¹²⁰ Cohen, Ibid.

¹²¹ Serge, "Is a Proletarian Literature possible," p. 142-3.

¹²² Serge, Clarte 12, March 1, 1925, p.144. (English translation)

dangerous, since it anticipated future culture within the framework of the present. Serge concluded that the state of culture mirrored the crossroads of the revolution, and its future was intimately connected to the future of the revolution. Serge's analysis of culture (as of politics in general) was deeply influenced by Trotsky, who provided the theoretical germ.

Serge put aside the question of culture when he returned to the Soviet Union to stand with the Left Opposition, but returned again to these questions after his arrest and expulsion. Many of the ideas he had expressed when criticizing or admiring other Russian writers, ideas about style and structure, were incorporated into his own novels, which were ideological at their core. Greeman asserts that Serge owed a literary debt to the Russian writers of the 1923 period, and was able both to continue their traditions and surpass them.¹²³

2.10 Serge and the Left Opposition

Critical of the use of terror, the bureaucratization of the Party and the State, the growing privileges which distanced the bureaucracy from the population and the aims of the revolution, the Left Opposition of Trotsky and others identified the bureaucracy as rooted in the new conditions of Soviet rule. Given that the original revolutionary working class had been largely decimated by Civil War and foreign intervention and the new working class was drawn mostly from a semi-literate peasantry, the Left Opposition argued that it was necessary for the Soviet state to promote an early and gradual industrialization as a precondition for the regeneration of class consciousness of the newly formed proletariat, with just one foot out of the countryside.

¹²³Greeman, op. cit., p. 342-3.

Industrial expansion would ensure that an increasing portion of the population would be grouped around collective production relations, which would serve to generate a proletarian consciousness amongst the mass of the population, as opposed to the petty-bourgeois consciousness of the peasantry.¹²⁴ As the working class grew, the bureaucracy would need to cede to it increasing control over the political administration of the society. The logic of this position also pointed to a dilemma which was not addressed: given the inevitable rise of bureaucracy in the terrible conditions in Russia, the new bureaucracy would be called upon to reform itself, to carry out policies which would lead to its own loss of power in favor of the new working class it was being called upon to create.¹²⁵ Theoretically the new working class would serve as a check against bureaucratic excesses and anti-democratic measures.

Serge was anxious about the growth of the rich peasant and the self-serving bureaucrat and about the weakness of industry under NEP (New Economic Policy) conditions;¹²⁶ a crisis was developing that demanded immediate attention. Without the hoped for success of the world socialist revolution, the Soviet Union would be forced to industrialize on its own.

Preobrazhensky, the economist of the Left Opposition, argued that the 'primitive socialist accumulation' had to come from the private peasant sector, but had to result from a reciprocal relationship; higher productivity in industry would provide goods for the peasants, and an increase in agricultural production would only be possible with a revolution in technique (mechanization), and more farm

¹²⁴See Evgenii Preobrazhensky, O Morali, quoted in Filtzer, op cit., p. 18, 276n.

¹²⁵See Filtzer, Ibid., pp.18-19.

¹²⁶Serge, From Lenin to Stalin, pp. 40-42.

machinery required higher productivity from the working class. In the end, the Left Opposition argued the problem could only be solved by material assistance from victorious revolutions in the advanced capitalist countries. They were doomed.

Bukharin came up with the opposite program, developing Stalin's notion of 'socialism in one country': increased incentives (opportunity for profit) for the peasant to stimulate growth. Stalin, (the center) was jealous of Trotsky's potential influence and wanted to undermine his authority; so he supported Bukharin's program largely as a way to weaken Trotsky's political influence. Consequently, the critical need for industrial accumulation was postponed while NEP proceeded apace. The political and economic situation hurtled toward disaster as the deteriorating crisis met continued neglect.

During the period 1923-26, Stalin, in charge of Party organization, packed the Party bureaus with people loyal to him (for which they were well compensated¹²⁷), predetermining the outcome of Party debates. Thus, to find an audience for his alternative political program, Trotsky would have had to go outside the party, something he was not prepared to do.

Serge joined the Left Opposition in 1923-1924 while in Vienna. He wrote that Trotsky's works, The New Course and The Lessons of October stood as "flashes of daylight" in the "spiritual impoverishment of recent years."¹²⁸ Serge met discreetly with other Oppositionists in Vienna to discuss these "pulsating pages."

"Then, bound by discipline, prisoners to our daily bread, we went on endlessly printing our news-sheets, with the same insipid, nauseating condemnations of everything that we knew to be

¹²⁷ Poshchekoldin, op. cit.

¹²⁸ Memoirs, p. 190.

true. Was it really worth while being revolutionaries if we had to ply this trade?"¹²⁹

The jargon filling the pages of the International's publications -- Serge said the Oppositionists called it 'Agitprop Pidgin'-- the stifling air of monolithism and '300% approval' made life difficult for Serge. He refused to carry out a dishonest directive from Bela Kun dealing with the French Party. Monatte, Rosmer and Souvarine were being hounded out of the French Party for showing political courage in criticizing Stalin. Everything Serge observed strengthened his view that the Comintern was going rotten from within, and the only way to save it was to go back to Russia, to fight for the regeneration of the Bolshevik Party. Serge could have remained in Europe in relative comfort; but his revolutionary spirit compelled him to return to the Soviet Union, to fight against the corruption of the Party in the front ranks of the Left Opposition. Lukacs had told him

"...don't be silly and get yourself deported for nothing, just for the pleasure of voting defiantly. Believe me, insults are not very important to us. Marxist revolutionaries need patience and courage; they do not need pride. The times are bad, and we are at a dark cross-roads. Let us reserve our strength: history will summon us in its time."¹³⁰

Serge did not heed Lukacs warning.¹³¹ Instead, he told Lukacs if Moscow and Leningrad proved to be unbearable, he would ask for an assignment in Siberia, where he would "write

¹²⁹Ibid, p. 191.

¹³⁰Ibid., p. 192.

¹³¹Lukacs, on the other hand, fell into disfavor over his book History and Class Consciousness, and was expelled from the Party. He later recanted, followed Stalin through the worst years, producing 'spiritless works.' He was 'summoned by history' again in 1956, this time to oppose Soviet tanks invading his native Hungary, where he was now Minister of Culture. He was deported to Rumania, but later was allowed to return to Hungary.

the books now maturing in my head and wait for better days."¹³²

¹³²Serge, Memoirs, p. 192.

CHAPTER THREE: BACK IN THE USSR -- THE LEFT OPPOSITION STRUGGLES 1926-1928

3.1 Bolshevism at an impasse

Serge returned to the USSR to stand with the Left Opposition in its battle for the soul of Bolshevism. He arrived in 1925, before the 14th Party Congress which broke up the ruling Triumvirate of Stalin, Kamenev and Zinoviev.

Serge had traveled by way of Berlin. Again he was struck by contrasts: Berlin had suffered -- it cost a "trillion for a postage stamp" -- but the city lit up the night sky; Leningrad¹ was dark and depopulated; its inflation and unemployment (150,000) were much worse than Berlin's.² The cost of returning to the market revealed itself everywhere: beggars and abandoned children roamed the streets. Young girls, the daughters of "famine and chaos" with nothing but their youth to sell sidled up to managers and bureaucrats. A morbid alternative to such degradation was evident in the swelling suicide lists Serge checked daily as an editor.³ But five years of NEP had ended famine, and for those who could afford it, the grocers' displays were abundant and sumptuous.

Disturbing incidents pointed to a moral crisis in NEP Soviet society, which Serge called a "social inferno." Evoking the ugly atmosphere in 1926 of what he called the 'obscure early

¹ Petrograd's name was changed to Leningrad after Lenin's death. Lenin would never have stood for this during his lifetime, although while he was alive Stalin had changed the name of Tsartisyn to Stalingrad, Elizvetgrad was changed to Zinovievsk, and factories, ships and schools also bore the name of Central Committee members. No one dared flatter Lenin in this way, he would not have tolerated it. Only with his death could Stalin begin first the cult of Lenin, and then his own cult. See Boris Souvarine, Stalin, pp. 303-4.

² Victor Serge, Memoirs, p. 193.

³ Ibid, p. 199.

stages of a psychosis' which would grow in intensity, Serge cited the 'epidemic' of gang-rapes. He tried to explain this in terms of conflict between a resurgent sexuality and its suppression, first by revolutionary asceticism, then by poverty and famine. Soviet youth had neither the inhibitions of bourgeois religious training, nor the moral values of the revolutionary generation. Theirs was the culture of the streets, in which sexual exploitation and promiscuity thrived on the misery of the environment.⁴ In place of the restrictive sexual mores of their parents, the notions of the new generation were based on the 'oversimplified' theories of Alexandra Kollantai, who said "you make love just as you drink a glass of water." Serge had posed a serious problem, quoting a discussion current among University students (in 1926) about Enchmen's theory on the disappearance of morals in the future Communist society. Without theorizing on the question, or even offering his own ideas, Serge simply lamented, "how difficult is social transformation!"⁵

Serge returned to a country plagued by a mood of surrender to desperation and death -- a calm, gloomy, oppressive atmosphere in which the creative and the revolutionaries alike were driven to take their own lives. Serge named some of the well-known victims, while reminding the reader that Leningrad had ten to fifteen suicides per day, mainly among the under-30s.⁶

⁴ Serge, Memoirs, p.205.

⁵ Serge, Memoirs, pp. 205-207. Remarkably, Serge has alluded to the problem which would surface decades later, of a spiritual and moral vacuousness endemic in alienated and apathetic Soviet youth who lack political, social or religious purpose.... Serge understood in 1926 the crisis of ideology which would result from the conditions of Soviet rule.

⁶ Ibid., p. 199.

Serge wrote about the suicides of oppositionists such as Lutovinov (of the Workers Opposition) in May 1924; of Glazman, Trotsky's young secretary; of Evgenia Bogdanovna Bosch, about whom he had written in Year One of the Russian Revolution (she had been a hero of the Civil War, one of Bolshevism's "greatest personalities."⁷) Her suicide was seen officially as an act of indiscipline, a proof of her oppositional politics and disloyalty. So she was not given a national funeral nor a burial place in the Kremlin wall. Preobrazhensky objected to the mean, small-minded treatment of Bosch's memory and remains and he was told to "hold his tongue."⁸

Poets began to kill themselves, a significant phenomenon for Serge who saw in these acts a signpost for the revolution, no longer able to hold onto its artists -- first Yesinin, later Mayakovsky, the two giants of Russian poetry. Yesinin hung himself in his hotel room with a suitcase strap, after writing his last lines in blood, for lack of ink. Serge, called to his room in the Hotel International, said farewell to "our greatest lyrical poet ... of the Revolution's singing Bohemians... 30 years old, at his peak of glory, eight times married...."⁹

Serge had returned then, to a Soviet Russia in the throes of a crisis very different from the one which racked the country he had left four years before. The threat of civil war and foreign intervention had given way to a new, internal threat: budding class antagonisms wrought by market forces, presided over by a single Party in power, and within that Party the normal democratic dynamic was being suffocated by bureaucratic maneuvering.

⁷ Ibid., p. 194.

⁸ Ibid., p. 195.

⁹ Ibid.

3.2 Serge's view of the Bolshevik's monopoly of power: the revolution self-destructs

Looking back at the NEP period (1921-1928) 20 years later, Serge affirmed that the introduction of NEP should have been accompanied by a coalition government. Sharing power would have been dangerous for the Bolsheviks, but the dangers would have likely proved less terrible than those that resulted from the monopoly of power.¹⁰ In fact, discontent and opposition within the Party and working class forced the Central Committee to adopt a 'state of siege' stance (albeit mild, especially compared to what came later), rather than a policy of reconciliation and tolerance towards other socialist elements, principally left Mensheviks and anarchists (both of whom accepted the Soviet constitution). Having said this, Serge wrote that deeper reasons had to be examined for this preservation and strengthening of the monopoly of power. After the trauma of Kronstadt, the Central Committee was afraid to open the political arena to competition from the Mensheviks and Left SR's.

More importantly, Serge offered another explanation for the Bolsheviks' trusting only themselves in power¹¹: that the Bolsheviks were committed to world revolution. A coalition government in Russia would have weakened the Comintern, whose task was to guide and direct the coming revolutions. The role of the Russian Party in the Comintern was paramount, for as we have seen in the last chapter, Serge considered the European revolutionary leaders inferior politically to the Bolsheviks. Yet isolated in the Soviet Union, how capable could the

¹⁰ Victor Serge, "Trente Ans Apres La Revolution Russe," published in La Revolution Proletarienne, Nov. 1947, p. 22. This retrospective of Soviet development written on its thirtieth birthday, was published in the month of Serge's death.

¹¹ Serge often conceded that by this juncture, all the revolutionaries were already inside the Bolshevik Party.

Bolsheviks be in directing the revolutionary leaderships of other countries?

Here Serge touched on what he considered the "greatest and gravest error of the Party of Lenin and Trotsky" and posed the question of whether the Bolsheviks' enthusiasm for European revolution was justified. Conceding that a satisfactory answer to this question was not possible, he nevertheless maintained it needed to be asked and 'delimited.'¹² Serge agreed that capitalism was finished as a stable force; the Bolsheviks were right, he said, to say that if socialism did not replace capitalism, another period of barbarism would follow. Writing after World War II, Serge surveyed what it had cost humanity to have failed to establish world socialism.

The Bolsheviks had hoped that social transformations would take place in Europe through the awakening of the masses, who would reorganize society on a rational and equitable basis. Their mistake, wrote Serge, was to not see clearly that the transformation that was taking place proceeded amidst a 'terrible confusion of institutions, movements and beliefs'¹³; the clarity of vision the Bolsheviks possessed was absent in Europe. Yet they were right to see the key to their salvation in Germany. The German revolution would have saved both Russia and Germany. This was not idle speculation, Serge insisted, because despite other struggles it may have produced, the German revolution would have spared history the 'hellish machinery of Hitlerism and Stalinism.'

There is a characteristic tension in Serge's argument here. He often brilliantly and perceptively posed essential questions, but then failed to resolve them. Often, pointing out a problem or a contradiction is all Serge intended, then he moved on. In the case of the German revolution, Serge contradicted himself.

¹²"Trente Ans Apres La Revolution Russe," p. 23.

¹³Ibid., p.24.

The Bolsheviks commit their "gravest error"¹⁴ in misjudging the revolutionary mood of the West European masses; yet they correctly analyzed the crisis of putrefying capitalism. Serge agreed with the Bolshevik's analysis, supported their actions, but criticized them for not being able to foresee the consequences of their actions.

The Bolshevik's mistake, according to Serge, was to misinterpreting the political understanding and energy of the working classes in the West, Germany in particular.¹⁵ The Bolsheviks' militant idealism, Serge wrote, caused them to miss connecting with the working classes in the West. As a result the Comintern remained a creature of the Soviet Party-State. John Reed's struggle with Zinoviev was a case in point. Serge maintained that this delusion helped create the 'fallacious doctrine' of socialism in one country. Further the tactics of the Stalinized Comintern facilitated the triumph of Nazism in Germany. Serge's criticism never implied that the Russian and German parties should not have undertaken the struggle:

"In fighting for revolution the German Spartacist, the Russian Bolsheviks, and all their worldwide comrades were struggling to prevent the global cataclysm which we have just lived through. They understood what was approaching. They were moved by a great will to liberation. Anyone who ever rubbed shoulders with them will never forget it. Few men in history have

¹⁴ Although Serge uses the superlative, he elsewhere proclaims their most "incomprehensible error" the establishment of the Cheka; the handling of the Kronstadt rebellion was for Serge the culmination of the "errors and mistakes of power." "Trente Ans Apres..." p. 18, and p. 23.

¹⁵ The mistake of the West European working classes was far more grave: they refused to support the struggle, believed in the return of the social progress of prewar days; were afraid of risks and allowed themselves to be fed with illusions; and allowed themselves to be led by mediocre leaders who feared revolution. See Serge, "Trente Ans Apres..." p. 26.

ever been so devoted to the cause of men as a whole.¹⁶

3.3 Inside the Bolshevik Party

Stalin had successfully begun concentrating organizational power in his hands in 1922, when he became General Secretary, at the time considered a relatively unimportant administrative post. He became known as "Comrade Card Index" (Tovarishch Kartotekov)¹⁷, the man in charge of assembling, reorganizing and classifying personnel files. Stalin paid close attention to organizational details, always to his own advantage. This 'administrative' post gave Stalin the opportunity to accumulate Power by placing people loyal to him in key positions throughout the apparatus. As Serge put it, Stalin had long been boring from within; his "tireless activity consisted in placing his creatures everywhere. His political flair lay in translating with great practical skill the aspirations of the parvenus of the revolution."¹⁸ He carefully prepared the 14th Party Congress which ousted Zinoviev and Kamenev; Serge wrote in his biography of Stalin that Zinoviev and Kamenev had lost power without realizing it. The Party had ceased voting and discussing sometime ago; its role had shrunk to approving the secretaries designated by the Central Committee, (in reality, by

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 25.

¹⁷ Cited in Geoffrey Hosking, The First Socialist Society: A History of the Soviet Union From Within, Harvard University Press, 1985, p. 140.

¹⁸ Serge, Russia Twenty Years After, p. 153. Today, as documents from the twenties are beginning to be examined, we find Serge to have been on the right track. In an article in Argumenti i Fakti, No. 27, 1990 Alexander Podshchekoldin, who has had access to the Archives of the CPSU, shows how Stalin was able, in the first nine months of his job as Gensec, to buy the loyalty of Party functionaries through granting them wide pay differentials and extravagant privileges.

Stalin.)¹⁹ Souvarine called this process, which took five years, Stalin's "molecular coup d'etat."²⁰

In contrast to Stalin's attention to detail, Trotsky, although described by Lenin as a zealous administrator, concerned himself with policy and theory. Lenin had called him the most "capable" man on the Central Committee. Echoing Lenin, Serge stated that only Trotsky had the necessary stature to lead the Party. Serge considered Trotsky the "most lucid of the inheritors of the 'heroic times'"²¹ armed with a program which in Serge's view, correctly addressed the key problems facing the young Soviet state. But Trotsky, a latecomer to the Bolsheviks with a Menshevik past, didn't belong to the old 'coterie' of Bolshevik militants who had been in the Party since 1903, and was unacceptable to them.

As Lenin fell gravely ill, a struggle broke out over who would 'succeed' him. On his death bed, Lenin proposed an alliance with Trotsky. His last letter called for Stalin's

¹⁹ Serge, Retrato de Stalin, p. 71.

²⁰ Serge, Twenty Years After, p. 154, and Souvarine, Stalin, chapters VIII and IX. Serge read Souvarine very closely, and obviously agreed with most of his formulations. His own work is peppered with quotations from Souvarine. (He sometimes disagreed with Souvarine, taking him to task in long footnotes, such as on page 162 in Russia Twenty Years After. Here Serge criticizes Souvarine's easy characterization of the Opposition's defeat as the result of its own mistakes. Serge remonstrates against Souvarine for accusing the Oppositionists of a lack of practical sense. Says Serge: "the practical sense of revolutionists who deem it necessary to fling themselves under the chariot wheels because it is in the higher interests of the proletariat, is just as different from that of the parvenus to whom the morrows of the great defeats of the working class offer invaluable opportunities for better installing themselves in power. Souvarine ought to know this, after all, for he, too, was a 'doctrinary' vanquished by the 'empiricists' because of his devotion to the International of the great years. (p. 162n)

²¹ Victor Serge, "Trente Ans Pres la Revolution Russe," p. 27. Serge always distinguished the civil war revolutionary generation of Bolsheviks from the 'parvenus' who followed.

removal.²² Lenin's 'Testament', as it became known, showed that Lenin had been preoccupied in his last months with the growth of bureaucratism. Serge quoted Souvarine, who said that the dictatorship of the proletariat was being replaced by the dictatorship of the secretariat.²³

Lenin had also feared a split in the Party. Souvarine thought Lenin's attitude much more ambivalent than Trotsky's version in My Life, often cited by Serge. Souvarine believed Lenin was so worried about a split that he sought to counterbalance Stalin and Trotsky with each other. Despite Lenin's concern, within a year of his death, the Party divided into Left, Center and Right tendencies, holding opposed perspectives on industrialization, collectivization,²⁴ the bureaucratization, and 'permanent revolution' versus 'socialism in one country.'

During the last year of Lenin's illness and the year following his death (1923-24), Zinoviev, Kamenev and Stalin teamed up in a vicious campaign against Trotsky and the Left Opposition. At the 13th Party Conference in January 1924, the first of a long line of completely stage-managed gatherings²⁵,

²² See Trotsky, My Life, p.

²³ See Boris Souvarine, Stalin, pp. 432, and all of chapter IX.

²⁴ The differences were over the tempo and pace of industrialization, and how to finance the process.

²⁵ Robert Daniels, The Conscience of the Revolution, p. 233.

the triumvers denounced Trotsky and the Forty Six²⁶ as guilty of a "petty bourgeois deviation from Leninism."²⁷

3.4 The Troika and the anti-Trotsky campaign

As we have just seen, once Lenin was too ill to participate actively in Party life, the 'old' party members, who had vacillated on the October revolution -- Zinoviev, Kamenev, Bukharin and Stalin -- began to organize against Trotsky. Rewriting history and attacking Trotsky's independence from the Bolshevik Party before 1917, Zinoviev, Kamenev and Stalin formed the Triumvirate, or Troika, which effectively ruled the Party and campaigned against Trotsky and Trotskyism.²⁸ The aim was to prevent Trotsky from garnering a majority in the Party and replacing Lenin.²⁹ The troika began a campaign of lies to attack Trotsky. They used the press to promulgate anti-Trotsky slanders, but libraries were also supplied with what Serge called 'dishonest books.' Kamenev (Trotsky's brother-in-law) had the distasteful job of directing this falsification of history and ideas, and later spoke to Trotsky about it "with unrestrained cynicism."³⁰ In this same period (throughout 1924) the Comintern became a monolith, and the international sections

²⁶ The "Platform of the 46," a document signed by 46 Bolsheviks including Preobrazhensky, Serebryakov, Breslav and others, was an anti-bureaucratic paper which criticized the "ever increasing, and now scarcely concealed, division of the party between a secretarial hierarchy and the 'quiet folk', between professional party officials recruited from above and the general mass of the party which does not participate in the common life." The entire Platform of the 46 is published in E.H. Carr, Interregnum, pp. 374-80.

²⁷ Deutscher, Vol. 2, p. 132.

²⁸ Trotsky called the Troika's anti-Trotsky campaign "a fight against the ideological legacy of Lenin." My Life, p. 508.

²⁹ Deutscher, The Prophet Unarmed, p. 75-77.

³⁰ Serge, Russia Twenty Years After, p. 153.

were instructed to condemn Trotskyism. Those who dared oppose of even question the line were expelled. The French Party eliminated Rosmer, Souvarine³¹ and Monatte at this time. This was called the 'Bolshevization' of the Comintern.³²

The Troika feared Trotsky as the most capable revolutionary leader of the masses. (Trotsky had been a mass leader in October, while Lenin had led the Party). Trotsky had organized the military victory in the civil war. He was a magnificent orator and brilliant theoretician, a man full of self confidence. From both a psychological and social point of view, Trotsky was ill-suited to the struggle for the apparatus. Superior in character, as well as theoretically and politically, to other members of the new ruling group³³, Trotsky had no taste for gossip, intrigue, slander or treachery. His presence made others uncomfortable.³⁴ He was a "revolutionary to his bones"³⁵

³¹ Souvarine was expelled for translating and publishing Trotsky's New Course.

³² The "Bolshevization' of the parties of the Communist International was the theses of Bela Kun at the fifth congress of the International in June 1924. Zinoviev saw the Comintern as the 'single world party.' Ruth Fischer, now the leader of the German party, echoed Zinoviev, calling for a monolithic International. The parties imitated the internal structure of the Bolshevik Party, banishing dissent, demanding 100% approval of the Leaders' positions. Serge called it the perfection of the bureaucratic machine. See Russia Twenty Years After, pp. 153-154. See also Deutscher, The Prophet Unarmed, pp. 146-147, and Theses and Resolutions of the Communist International.

³³ Referring here not to Bukharin, Zinoviev and Kamenev with whom Trotsky could engage in theoretical debate, but to Stalin's cohorts Kalinin, Voroshilov, and like 'mediocrities.'

³⁴ Trotsky explained that he didn't partake in social 'amusements' with other members of the leading stratum, in order to avoid boredom; moreover, when he did appear, group conversations would stop, and those in conversation would look either bitterly or shamefacedly toward Trotsky. My Life, p. 525.

whose concern was class struggle, both national and global. He measured human personality on "the Marx scale,"³⁶ that is, he judged men by their capabilities in serving the demands of historical necessity.

Trotsky remained silent during the campaign against Trotskyism. He came down with a fever of unknown origin that kept him in bed and out of the struggle. Trotsky confessed that it was then that he realized, "with absolute clarity the problem of the Thermidor -- with, I might even say, a sort of physical conviction."³⁷ Lying in bed, Trotsky analyzed the historical curve of development which created such a large demand for slander, and which allowed such a degradation of the theoretical level of argument.

This was the political atmosphere in Moscow and Leningrad to which Serge returned from his years abroad. He described the Party as in a state of slumber. The universities had been purged, the public was apathetic, and youth had turned in on itself. Trotsky wrote on cultural questions, but refrained from activity. Although the situation was bad enough, Serge wrote that the Oppositionists remained optimistic. Their optimism was based on their conviction of the correctness of their ideas, rather than on the actual state of their struggle. Trotsky published a series of articles that became Towards Capitalism or Socialism (published in 1926) which affirmed that they were on the way towards socialism, and that a private sector should be maintained around the nationalized factories. Serge discussed Trotsky's ideas in a series of articles in La Vie Ouvriere.³⁸

³⁵ The phrase is Sieva Volkov's (Trotsky's grandson). Private conversation, Mexico City, May 1987.

³⁶ Trotsky, My Life, p.532.

³⁷ Trotsky, My Life, p. 534.

³⁸ Serge, Memoirs, p. 209.

Serge recalled a directive brought to him by Victor Eltsin from "the old Man" (Trotsky) which said: "for the moment we must not act at all: no showing ourselves in public but keep our contacts, preserve our cadres of 1923, and wait for Zinoviev to exhaust himself...."³⁹ Serge interpreted this to mean activity would be reduced to literary activity and studying, to keep up morale. The Opposition for the moment remained under Party discipline and kept their political and organizational activity to a minimum. Their theoretical output in this period, however, was prodigious.

The waiting period was fraught with difficulties for the militants of the Left Opposition circles. We will return to these difficulties in the discussion of Serge's activities in Leningrad. Trotsky laid low and refused to go outside the Party to fight. Limiting the attempt to spread Oppositionist ideas to within the Party meant the fight was hopeless -- Stalin had packed the party with his loyal mediocrities who shouted down the Oppositionists.

Once the triumvers had defeated Trotsky and removed him from the Commissariat of War, the bonds of their solidarity snapped.⁴⁰ A year of growing political divergences within the Politburo ensued, accompanied by petty maneuvering between Stalin, Zinoviev, Kamenev and Bukharin. The Leningrad and Moscow organizations of the Party were in conflict; Zinoviev headed the Leningrad organization, while Stalin was in control in Moscow. Zinoviev denounced the kulak danger and the bureaucratic regime, which he himself created.⁴¹ But it wasn't

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Deutscher, The Prophet Unarmed, p. 241.

⁴¹ Panait Istrati, Soviets 1929, Les Editions Rieder, Paris, 1929, p. 115. This book was actually written by Serge. His authorship has been cited in several sources, among them in the introduction to the first volume of Istrati's trilogy Vers l'autre flamme, republished in France in 1980 with an
(continued...)

until April 1925 that political differences were to emerge within the Triumvers. Zinoviev was opposed to 'socialism in one country' and entered into conflict with both Stalin and Bukharin. Throughout the summer of 1925, the dissension was kept out of view. Zinoviev and the Leningrad organization attacked Bukharin and Rykov, which Deutscher said inadvertently helped Stalin to consolidate his position at the helm.⁴² The Troika of Stalin-Zinoviev-Kamenev broke up at the 14th Party Congress in December 1925. The 14th Party Congress brought the conflict into the open; for the Opposition, it ended the period of laying low and waiting. Zinoviev and Kamenev, maneuvered out of power at the Congress, were now on the side of the Opposition. Bureaucrats of the worst order themselves, Zinoviev and Kamenev now attacked bureaucracy, and in 1926, joined with Trotsky forming the United Opposition to Stalin.

* * *

With hindsight it is easy to say that an open fight should have been waged in the period 23-25, and the question naturally arises: why did Trotsky choose to remain within the Party? Why did he not take the battle to the mass of workers? Trotsky probably could have staged a successful coup early in the conflict. He had widespread support among the masses and in the army. But he was opposed to palace coups. What would such a 'victory' have meant?

Trotsky also still believed that the Party, even though now degenerated, was "the only historic instrument which the working

⁴¹(...continued)

introduction by Marcel Mermoz, by the Fondation Panait Istrati, Union Generale D'Editions, Paris, pp. 29-30. The second volume of the trilogy was Soviets 1929 and the third was penned by Boris Souvarine, although published as written by Istrati.

⁴² Ibid., p. 242.

class possessed for the solution of its fundamental tasks."⁴³ Trotsky evidently believed that if there were even a remote possibility of internal rectification in the Party, it had to be tried. Serge agreed that failing to struggle against the bureaucratic degeneration of the Soviet regime would have meant a further demoralization in the international labor movement.⁴⁴ But Trotsky confined his terrain of battle to the Party, where he least stood a chance of victory.⁴⁵

Confining the battle to the Party ranks left the masses of workers with no arena for activity as a class. Why didn't the Opposition campaign for a genuine revival of the Soviets? Caught in the dilemma of trying to promote democracy while remaining loyal to an organization that prohibited opposition, the Left Opposition undermined its own struggle. Trotsky did not stand a chance within the Party, even though, as Serge said, he alone had the stature to succeed Lenin. How could Trotsky hope to win over the bureaucrats he was attacking in the new course? Moreover the weariness of the masses left them passive; the Party filled with self-serving mediocrities, had no vitality. Under these conditions, exacerbated by the failure of the world revolution, the struggle was practically doomed from the outset.

In fact Serge's post-mortem on Soviet democracy was that it had been killed long before, by Civil War, War Communism, Kronstadt, and the dilution of the Party -- recruiting without training, taking in the 'profiteers,' adventurers, and 'petty

⁴³ Trotsky's declaration at the Thirteenth Party Congress, 1924. Quoted in Deutscher, The Prophet Unarmed, p. 161.

⁴⁴ Serge, Russia Twenty Years After, pp. 155-156.

⁴⁵ Moreover, Anton Ciliga maintained Trotsky was more popular than Stalin in the country at large, and that all he had to do was show himself at the factories in the three major cities to ensure his victory. But, Ciliga continued, Trotsky wanted to avoid an open break in the Party. Ciliga, The Russian Enigma, p. 86.

parvenus' who supported without question the banning of factions and other parties.... Without 'democratic morals or the freedom of tendencies' (Trotsky's demands in the New Course) within the Party, not much of a fight could be waged.

3.5 Changing composition of Bolshevik Party and the rise of bureaucracy

The Lenin levy in the spring of 1924 brought a mass of inexperienced workers into the Party, strengthening Stalin's position. Serge wondered what the worth of these communists could be if they waited until Lenin died to join the Party.⁴⁶ The quarter-million new recruits (later to be 500,000⁴⁷), Serge remarked, changed the party from one of the Vanguard to one of the Rearguard. He defined this new party as "a mass party of backward workers led by parvenu bureaucrats."⁴⁸ How effective could the Opposition be among these political illiterates? The Oppositionists were effectively isolated. They were also organizationally hamstrung, as the ban on factions had been in effect since 1921. Party patriotism ran deep and the idea of going over the head of the Party to the masses was not considered. Serge wrote to his friend Jacques Mesnil, in 1928:

"Basically what is happening -- leaving aside the economic roots of the problem...-- boils down to this: the elimination of one generation by another. Those who made the revolution are removed by those who are rising. The new generation did not know the class struggle in its clear and direct forms, nor the yoke of the old regime. On the contrary, it has been told time and again that it was victorious and it ends by believing it....Nor did it go through the civil war...Everything we went through before, the difficult and perilous working out of convictions, the tempering of the militant by devotion and individual effort, the

⁴⁶ V. Serge, Russia Twenty Years After, p. 150.

⁴⁷ Hoskings, op. cit., p. 143.

⁴⁸ Serge, Twenty Years After, p. 151.

courage of being in a minority, scrupulous theoretical intelligence, revolutionary lyricism -- all these things are alien to it. It is fed an official science, it has an oversimplified, avid and practical mentality of the parvenu on the make. It naturally distorts the clearest ideas as its interests dictate, ready to retain the old prestige-labels so long as they cover something new. Since heredity weighs down, since the country is one of small peasant property, since the pressure of the capitalist encirclement is enormous -- the attempts to deny it are ludicrous -- you now have a whole new potential bourgeoisism, latent but already pushing upward and even flourishing in places, and infinitely skilful in disguises. I am intimately acquainted with writers, with intellectuals, who are, at bottom, our mortal enemies, whose anti-socialist convictions have the firmness of rock: their professions are made in Marxian terms, they remove heretics from editorial staffs....And they understand quite well what they are doing. Their whole problem lies in staying on for a few years and then the game is theirs. This process has overtaken the party. Here is the membership proportion of a cell that I know well: 400 members, 20 of whom go back to August 1921, and 3 or 4 to August 1917. Consequently, 380 against 20 came over not to the militant or the painful revolution, but to the power, and after the N.E.P. Two elements must be discerned there: men of mature age--they deliberately refrained from joining before the NEP. That's clear enough. And the young: they know neither capitalism nor the civil war and the creator of a Red Army built out of nothing has less prestige in their eyes than the minister of the hour."⁴⁹

Serge's analysis of conditions in the party made it plain that it was being taken over by NEPmen, former bourgeois and opportunists of every stripe who recognized power and wanted to be part of it. The Opposition had no hope of winning within such a Party. Again, why didn't the Opposition take their program outside the Party?

Serge answered the criticism made of Trotsky for not resorting to a coup which would probably have been successful given his popularity and standing. Quite simply, Serge wrote,

⁴⁹ Victor Serge, letter to Jacques Mesnil, quoted in RTYA, pp. 151-152n.

that would mean "forgetting that socialism and workers' democracy cannot be born out of pronunciamientos. It is to the merit of the revolutionist that he refuses to take to this road, so tempting to all the ambitious."⁵⁰ Serge also cautioned that a Marxist must look deeper than whether or why Trotsky did or didn't fight during this period. The Marxist, wrote Serge, understood that the socialist revolution which unfolded in Russia could never be considered apart from the international labor movement.⁵¹ Although by 1923 both the Russian Party and the International were 'dulled' and 'stiffened at the joints' the Russian proletariat still hoped boundlessly for a successful outcome in Germany and actively worked toward that end. The bureaucratization of the International compromised everything, wrote Serge⁵². The bureaucratic conquest in the Soviet Union could be explained, above all else, he continued, by the defeat of the workers' revolution in Central Europe.

inally, in relation to the process of bureaucratization, Serge in 1938 found it necessary to again clarify the situation in a "Reply to Ciliga" written in Oct. 1938, that is many years and experiences later:

In reality, a little direct contact with the people was enough to get an idea of the drama which, in the revolution, separated the communist party (and with it the dust of the other revolutionary groups) from the masses. At no time did the revolutionary workers form more than a trifling percentage of the masses themselves. In 1920-21, all that was energetic, militant, ever-so-little socialistic in the labor population and among the advanced elements of the countryside had already been drained by the communist party, which did not, for four years of civil war, stop its constant mobilization of the willing -- down to the most vacillating. Such things came to pass:

⁵⁰ Serge, Russia After Twenty Years, pp. 147-148.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Here his position, written in 1936, is less nuanced than in 1923-1925 and tallies exactly with Trotsky's. Ibid, p. 148.

a factory numbering a thousand workers, giving as much as half its personnel to the various mobilizations of the party and ending by working only at low capacity with the five hundred left behind for the social battle, one hundred of them former shopkeepers And since, in order to continue the revolution, it is necessary to continue the sacrifices, it comes about that the party enters into conflict with that rank and file. It is not the conflict of the bureaucracy and the revolutionary workers, it is the conflict of the organization of the revolutionists -- and the backward ones, the laggards, the least conscious elements of the toiling masses. Under cover of this conflict and of the danger, the bureaucracy fortifies itself, no doubt. But the healthy resistances that it encounters -- I mean those not based upon demoralization or the spirit of reaction -- come from within the party and the other revolutionary groups. It is within the Bolshevik party that a conflict arises in 1920, not between the rank and file -- which is itself already very backward -- but between the cadres of the active militants and the bureaucratic leadership of the Central Committee. In 1921, everybody who aspires to socialism is inside the party; what remains outside isn't worth much for the social transformation. Eloquence of chronology: it is the non-party workers of this epoch, joining the party to the number of 2,000,000 in 1924, upon the death of Lenin, who assure the victory of its bureaucracy. I assure you, Ciliga, that these people never thought of the Third International. Many of the insurgents of Kronstadt did think of it; but they constituted an undeniable elite and, duped by their own passion, they opened in spite of themselves the doors to a frightful counter-revolution. The firmness of the Bolshevik party, on the other hand, sick as it was, delayed Thermidor by five to ten years.⁵³

3.6 The economic roots of the problem and the issues at stake: the debates of the 1920's

The issues which embroiled the Party and the Opposition in both political and literary activity revolved around the questions of industrialization, internationalism, and bureaucracy.

⁵³ Victor Serge, "Reply to Ciliga," New International, Feb. 1939, p.54.

Serge wrote that from 1924-1925 it would have been possible to "curb the formation of a rural bourgeoisie without leaving the framework of NEP." Failure to do so led to a civil war with the peasantry in the form of forced collectivization.⁵⁴ Had it begun at the right time, industrialization would have improved relations between town and country. Trotsky advocated such a policy. According to Serge, Preobrazhensky, Sokolnikov⁵⁵ and Piatakov took these ideas up numerous times, before they became the program of the Opposition.⁵⁶

The civil war had decimated the working class and in place of the fallen workers came semi-literate peasants, without class consciousness, without class traditions, and without revolutionary consciousness. The surviving working class and the newly formed workers labored under conditions remote from

⁵⁴ Serge, Russia 20 Years After, p. 278-9.

⁵⁵ Sokolnikov was a leader of the Zinoviev group with Kamenev and Krupskaya at the Fourteenth Party Congress. As Finance Minister, he espoused 'rightist' economic policies, encouraging private enterprise; but he stood with the left on the issues of Party democracy, political reform, and the struggle against bureaucracy and Stalin's growing power. See Deutscher, The Prophet Unarmed, p. 247; Daniels, The Conscience of the Revolution, p. 291, and E.H. Carr, Vol. 6, Socialism In One Country, part two, pp. 73-74.

⁵⁶ Serge, Ibid. Serge's writing here, in the conclusion to Russia Twenty Years After, was done hastily to get the book out quickly; nevertheless Serge's lumping together of Sokolnikov with Preobrazhensky and Piatakov in the context of Oppositionist economic policy is highly misleading, and can only be considered as historical sloppiness. Sokolnikov defined the Soviet state as 'state capitalist,' with the major shortcoming of the leadership (apart from its anti-democratic and bureaucratic tendencies) was its inability to make the system function efficiently. He favored the expansion of agricultural production before the expansion of industry -- in direct conflict with Preobrazhensky's economic prescriptions and coincided with the Opposition on political questions, such as bureaucracy and on the need for Party democracy. See fn 28 above.

socialist goals: without any say in factor management, and without power or voice in political decision-making.⁵⁷

In response to the revolution's isolation, Stalin concocted the doctrine of 'socialism in one country' which Bukharin developed into a theory. The doctrine emerged from the physical and political reality of isolation. Stalin reacted pragmatically to events, improvising theories to fit circumstances and objectives, rather than proceeding from any theoretical understanding or overall vision. Socialism in one country was a product of pessimism and fantasy: pessimism about world revolution; and the fantasy that a classless communist society could be built in a single, backward and beleaguered country, surrounded by the capitalist world market. The idea was not entirely new: the utopian socialists and nationalists had advocated a similar, isolated socialism. The concept was completely alien to Marx and Engels, to Lenin, and even to Stalin himself, before he became demoralized with the world struggle and power hungry in the domestic one.⁵⁸

The Opposition argued against Stalin's 'reactionary utopia,'⁵⁹ instead counterposing to it Marxist economic theory. To try to maintain the proletarian revolution within the

⁵⁷ See Donald Filtzer, Soviet Workers and Stalinist Industrialization, pp. 13-15.

⁵⁸ Stalin was compelled to admit that Marx and Engels never entertained the idea, and said the idea was "first formulated by Lenin in 1915." This reference to Lenin is entirely unfounded, as the overwhelming bulk of his work states precisely the opposite, that "For the final victory of socialism, for the organization of socialist construction, the efforts of one country, particularly of such a peasant country as Russia, are insufficient. For this the efforts of the proletarians of several advanced countries are necessary." Many other similar citations of Lenin's show his understanding of the international character of socialism. See Max Schachtman, Genesis of Trotskyism: The first Ten Years of the Left Opposition, IMG Publications, London, 1973, pp. 18-19.

⁵⁹ The phrase comes from Trotsky's Permanent Revolution, p. ix.

boundaries of the Soviet Union, the Trotskyists argued, would inevitably lead to its succumbing to its own internal and external contradictions. Internationalism is not a sentiment, but is based on the development of the world economy, which becomes increasingly interlinked as it evolves. Trotsky wrote in Permanent Revolution, "internationalism is no abstract principle but a theoretical and political reflection of the character of world economy, of the world development of productive forces, and the world scale of the class struggle." The debate between the nationalist conception of socialism and socialist internationalism was opened in 1925, but assumed greater importance in 1927, in the wake of the Chinese revolution. While the theoretical debate continued, the crisis in the country deepened.

Bukharin's conversion from left communist and 'proletarianist' to theorist of the right opposition, to a pro-market, nationalist, socialism in one country, was also based on the defeat of world revolution.⁶⁰ Recognizing that Soviet Russia was left with the Russian peasantry, Bukharin turned to them with new enthusiasm. But instead of improving conditions, Bukharin's policy of encouraging the kulaks to enrich themselves meant things were going from bad to worse. "There was talk of broadening the rights of inheritance," Serge wrote, and "Stalin proposed in a barely veiled form the restoration of landed property for the rich peasants."⁶¹ There was squalid, heartbreaking poverty, an ulcer in our young society, while

⁶⁰ Bukharin had come a long way from the early Left Communist of 1918, and the enthusiastic supporter of War Communism in 1919-1920, in which he proclaimed the mode of organization under War communism as 'final.' See chapter 1 *infra*, p. 73.

⁶¹ See E.H.Carr, Vol. 6, Socialism in One Country, pp. , and Deutscher, The Prophet Unarmed, p. 244.

wealth was arrogant and self-satisfied."⁶² Serge's anxiety, matched by the Left Opposition, while deeply felt, was not based on emotion, but on an intellectual appreciation of economic truth; the society was becoming bourgeoisified and degraded.

What were the facts? In an article published in Clarte in 1927, Serge discussed the social structure of the countryside, quoting an inquiry done in 1925 by the Communist Academy of the Caucasus, the Ukraine, the Urals and the region of NovoSizirsk⁶³. The study found that the peasantry was thus divided: poor peasants (with only a few machines) made up 25-40% of all families; middle peasants 40-50%, and kulaks, or rich peasants, with most of the machinery making up 15-25% of all families, not a negligible quantity. Beyond that, the poor peasants often cultivated their plots with tools rented from kulaks. Moreover the poor and middle peasant together held only 35-65% of arable land, the rest belonging to the kulak. These findings led the Commission of the State Plan to declare "small circles of rural capitalists hold a considerable part of the wealth in the countryside."⁶⁴ Still more wealth was held by the merchants and traders (NEPmen) who benefitted from the market, at the expense of the worker and poor peasant. Serge found even more threatening the fact that the "kulak, the merchant, the intellectual bourgeois are becoming one, with many links to the bureaucracy of the State and the Party ... laying down the basis of a duality of powers which menaces the dictatorship of the proletariat."⁶⁵

⁶² Victor Serge, From Lenin to Stalin, p.40.

⁶³ Victor Serge, "Vers L'industrialisation," Part II, Clarte XVI-10, 29 Nov. 1927, p.486.

⁶⁴ Serge, Ibid.

⁶⁵ Serge, Clarte, p. 488. In this section of Serge's article ("Vers L'Industrialisation" pt. II) Serge quotes from the Counter-Thesis of the Opposition (counter to the Thesis
(continued...))

Serge saw the country approaching "a crisis which might arouse a hundred and twenty million peasants against the socialist power and place it at the mercy of foreign capital by forcing it to import (on credit? and under what conditions?) great quantities of manufactured goods."⁶⁶

Both Preobrazhensky and Bukharin sought to increase national wealth, but while Bukharin thought this was only possible through private accumulation, Preobrazhensky argued in his New Economics that 'primitive socialist accumulation,' must be accomplished by taking more out of the private sector than was put into it. There was no alternative, given their isolation, to hardships and restricted consumption. Had a socialist revolution occurred in an advanced capitalist country with an industrial base, as Marx envisioned, the problems would have been different. Given this situation, there would have to be sacrifices, but in Preobrazhensky's view the decision to impose hardships would be a conscious one made by the proletariat.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ (...continued)

approved by the Central Committee, written by Rykov and Krjijanovski) written by Zinoviev, Trotsky, Kamenev, Rakovski, Piatakov, Smilga and others, and published in the discussion documents of pravda of 17 November.

⁶⁶ Serge, From Lenin to Stalin, p. 41.

⁶⁷ Preobrazhensky discussed the difference between what he called 'primitive socialist accumulation' and capitalist accumulation in the New Economics. Capitalist accumulation takes a "ruthless, barbarous, spendthrift attitude to labour power, which it attempts to treat like any other purchased commodity which forms one of the elements of production. The limits of exploitation and oppression in this sphere are the purely physiological limits (the worker has to sleep and eat) or else the resistance of the working class." But "from the moment of its victory the working class is transformed from being merely the object of exploitation into being also the subject of it. [my emphasis] It cannot have the same attitude to its own labor power, health, work and conditions as the capitalist has. This constitutes a definite barrier to the
(continued...)

Preobrazhensky's program was based on a thoroughgoing workers democracy, and although it meant the peasantry would be squeezed, he never favored forced collectivization or forced grain requisitions. There would also have been growth in the private peasant sector. Yet Preobrazhensky realized that without an extension of the revolution to the West, the Soviet Union was doomed.

Trotsky had certain disagreements with Preobrazhensky's formulations which some interpreted to mean that it was possible to accomplish primitive socialist accumulation within the Soviet Union alone, or in association with other underdeveloped countries. Trotsky not only thought this unrealistic, but saw that it opened the door for a theoretical accommodation to socialism in one country. Trotsky also differed with Preobrazhensky on the pace of industrialization. These differences were not fundamental, however; both Trotsky and Preobrazhensky advocated the necessity of systematically taking up industrial accumulation, and neither held any brief with 'socialism in one country.'⁶⁸

The battle lines were drawn. The opposing forces formed up: the bureaucracy was with Stalin, the opposition with Trotsky.

Serge entered the battle in 1927, just before the 15th Party Congress in which the Opposition was expelled, by publishing "Vers L'Industrialisation" in two parts in the French review Clarte. The article put forward the platform of the opposition with interesting nuances of difference. The article clearly employed caution in its style of argument -- Serge was still a member of the Party, under Party discipline -- but

⁶⁷ (...continued)
tempo of socialist accumulation, a barrier..." Evgeny Preobrazhensky, The New Economics, Oxford University Press, 1965, p. 122.

⁶⁸ Deutscher discusses the differences between Trotsky and Preobrazhensky in his The Prophet Unarmed, pp. 237-238.

nevertheless was completely at odds with 'official' policy. The novel points Serge introduced into the debate concern the financial resources for industrialization, the pivotal point of contention between the 'left' and 'right' oppositions. Serge noted that even the policy of allowing the peasant to accumulate was being undermined during the NEP by the NEPmen themselves. Private capital dominated the retail trade in NEP Soviet Union, buying wholesale in the cities to sell retail in the provinces. The private traders, not the State, thus reaped the profit of squeezing the peasantry.⁶⁹ Admitting that statistics were difficult to obtain, Serge quoted from the Koutler inquiry carried out by the Institute of Economic Research of the Commissariat of Finance, which showed that private capital in 1926 had reached 1/14 of its pre-war level.⁷⁰ Serge estimated that private commerce in 1925-1926 had attained 7.5 billion rubles per year out of a total GNP of 31 billion. Given that even these figures were deceptive, Serge concluded that a mixed economy was impossible because private capital gouges the profits from state production. A vivacious new bourgeoisie was being constituted, obtaining its capital exclusively from the "pillage of state goods and by speculation"⁷¹. Serge conceded that this was made possible by the weakness of Soviet industry and distribution. His solution was the same as the Left

⁶⁹ Preobrazhensky had admitted that a part of the surplus product was captured by private capital in the form of merchant's profit, due in large part to the inadequate state of the system of distribution in the young Soviet state. He also conceded that the Nepmen were profiting on internal loans; but he did not go as far as Serge did in terms of the scale of wealth obtained by nascent new bourg. See Preobrazhensky, The New Economics, pp. 189-190.

⁷⁰ Serge, Vers, quoting Kondoruchkine, Le Capital prive devant la justice sovietique, Librairie de l'etat, 1927.

⁷¹ Serge, "Vers L'Industrialisation," Part I, Clarte XV-8, p. 440, 20 October 1927.

Opposition's: industrialization on a large scale. How to finance the industrialization?

...to industrialize, we need capital. The capitalists won't give us credit. Where will we get the money? We have just seen that the peasants accumulate wheat and money; we have seen that private commerce rakes in big profits; we have seen the bureaucracy rip off a parasitical amount that Stalin and Rykov evaluated last year at more than 300 million rubles per year. The necessary capital for industrialization circulates, therefore if the dictatorship of the proletariat could seize this capital for the growing new bourgeoisie the industrial development of the Soviet Union could be undertaken with unprecedented vigor." para 23-24. (Nous venons de voir que les paysans accumulent du ble et des fonds; nous voyons le commerce prive realiser de beaux benefices; nous allons voir la bureaucratie prelever sur les frais d'administration une dime parasitaire que Staline et Rykov evaluaient, l'an dernier, dans un manifeste memorable, a plus de 300 millions de roubles par an. Les capitaux necessaires a l'industrialisation circulent donc dans le pays."⁷²

Like the Left Opposition, Serge saw the only way out of the economic impasse in large scale industrialization, financed through the elimination of NEP speculation and profiteering. The role of the international proletariat, Serge added, was to aid this process, at least intellectually. Serge stressed the role of the international proletariat, but he did so in the vaguest of terms. Industrialization might be undertaken in a single country, but Serge nowhere argued that this could be misconstrued as accomplishing socialism in one country. Serge's article did not pose the problem as ultimately insoluble in socialist terms, as both Preobrazhensky and Trotsky finally did.

3.7 Victor Serge: Left Opposition activist

⁷² Serge, *ibid.*, p. 441.

Serge did not come to oppositionist ideas suddenly. As we have seen, he had been critical of anti-democratic and bureaucratic tendencies from the moment they surfaced when the revolution was only a few months old. The events of the years 1923-1927, however, were so alarming, that even Lenin's politics would have placed him in the camp of the Opposition. Krupskaya said she would have expected Stalin to imprison Lenin... Lenin's last Testament indicated where he would have been likely to stand in the fight.

When Serge joined the Left Opposition in Vienna in 1923-24, he had been agreeing with oppositional views for several years. Serge, like the others, felt obligated to rescue the revolution from those who were destroying it from within⁷³; to revive its essence and vision -- to create a democratically planned economy controlled by the associated producers, which could serve as an example to the international working class. The Oppositionists fought against Stalin's narrowly nationalist and bureaucratic conception of Soviet development, crudely 'legitimized' by a single phrase of Lenin's taken out of context.⁷⁴

Serge's activities within the Left Opposition had three dimensions: domestic, international, and literary. Trotsky called him one of the Opposition's most capable members.⁷⁵ The French historian Pierre Broue identified Serge as 'marginal' within the Left Opposition⁷⁶, because Serge was not one of its theoretical leaders and did not agree 100% with all its politics. Serge wrote no theoretical treatises such as

⁷³ One of the themes Serge stressed in recounting his reunions upon his return to the USSR with people he hadn't seen since 1921 was: 'we did not create the Revolution to come to this.'

⁷⁴ See Robert V. Daniels, The Conscience of the Revolution, Simon and Schuster, New York, p. 252.

⁷⁵ Leon Trotsky, Writings, Supplement to 1929-30, p.

⁷⁶ In a private conversation in Mexico City, May 1987.

Preobrazhensky's New Economics, or Rakovsky's analysis of the First Five Year Plan in Crisis. As a spokesman, historian, pamphleteer, and revolutionary novelist, however, no one else in the Left Opposition was as valuable as Serge. Serge was an unorthodox member, due to his unique revolutionary experience in the international working class movement. We will show later that the Left Opposition was not monolithic, and Serge was an excellent example of its thinking, capable militants.

Serge's unique qualities made him a valuable addition to the Opposition: his knowledge of languages, his international revolutionary experience (by now in three revolutions), and his stature as a well known intellectual in France. Serge was a regular contributor to the press of the International Communist movement, mainly in France, but also in German and English speaking countries. His articles in Inprekor, Bulletin Communiste, Clarte, La Vie Ouvriere, etc. helped spread the Opposition platform and gathered support for its politics. As a member of the Leningrad cell of the Soviet Party, Serge was a public spokesman for the Opposition and as a member of the clandestine Leningrad Opposition Serge helped recruit more Party members to the Opposition. Serge also played a role in the Opposition leadership, conferring with Trotsky, Preobrazhensky, Radek and others on Opposition policy.

The Opposition sought out Serge immediately upon his return to Russia at the end of 1925. Vassily Chadayev met Serge in Leningrad and gave him the password 'Taras' which the Piatakov Circle in Moscow designated for Serge to use to contact the clandestine Opposition in Leningrad.⁷⁷ Although the Trotskyists had been playing a waiting game since 1923, they met regularly and Serge was invited to join their circle.

The group met in the Astoria in the agronomist N.I. Karpov's room. The group usually consisted of Karpov, Serge, two or three students of working-class origin, two old Bolshevik

⁷⁷ Serge, Memoirs, p. 207.

workers who had been "in every revolution in Petrograd for the last twenty years," the worker Feodorov who later was executed as a member of the Zinoviev tendency, and two Marxist theoreticians 'of genuine worth.' (Grigori Yakovlevich Yakovin and Feodor Dingelstedt.)⁷⁸ Alexandra Lvovna Bronstein -- known as "Babushka" -- usually chaired the meetings.⁷⁹ Alexandra Lvovna was the mother of Trotsky's two daughters Zinaida (Zina) and Nina, both of whom were to perish. Bronstein herself was deported and disappeared during Stalin's years of Terror. Serge said he had known few Marxists "as free in their basic outlook as Alexandra Lvovna."⁸⁰ Nikolai Pavlovich Baskakov, who questioned whether the system could be reformed. Chadeyev⁸¹, who

⁷⁸ Yakovin had been in Germany and wrote what Serge described as an excellent book on Germany. He spent many years in Oppositional activity, making the rounds of the prisons, and disappeared in 1937. Dingelstedt was one of the Bolshevik agitators behind the mutiny of the Baltic fleet in 1917. He published a book on "The Agrarian Question in India"s and was described by Serge as representing an extreme-Left tendency which, like Sapronov, considered the regime's deterioration now complete. Serge said that like, Yakovin, Dingelstedt was never broken. Memoirs, pp. 207-208.

⁷⁹ She was Trotsky's first wife, with more than 35 years of revolutionary experience; in fact, she brought Trotsky into the Marxist circle she ran in Nikolayev in the 1890's. This was Trotsky's first political experience. See Trotsky, My Life, pp.

⁸⁰ Serge, Memoirs, p. 208.

⁸¹ Chadeyev, who became Serge's friend and collaborator in the Opposition and members of the same Party cell at the Krassnaya Gazeta, was the first of their circle to be killed. After spending six months in prison in 1928, Chadeyev was sent on assignment by Krassnaya Gazeta to investigate kolkhozes in the Kuban. Once there Chadeyev wrote of corruption and rackets there in building, industry and agriculture. He had obviously stepped on too many toes and asked too many questions. On 26 August 1928 the local authorities insisted he take a carriage to another town; although the carriage was accompanied by a militiaman, he made himself scarce when only Chadeyev's carriage was stopped by 'bandits.' Chadeyev was
(continued...)

raised the question of the collectivization of agriculture long before the Party leadership, was the only one in the Opposition to privately put the question of a second party. He predicted the 'great trials of deception.' These outstanding characters rounded out the group with Serge, who specialized in international questions. Serge emphasized that this was the sum total of the roll call of the Leningrad Opposition Circle, and that there was never any other Centre of the Left Opposition in Leningrad.⁸² Serge's insistence (written in 1941) must be in response to later charges by the GPU of 'Trotskyite' centers in Leningrad.

Moscow's Opposition circle numbered more than 500 according to Victor Eltsin⁸³. The Party was 'in a state of slumber' and the Opposition kept up its morale by writing and publishing LDT's Collected Works. All this was to change when the inner-party struggle came alive with the ouster of Zinoviev and Kamenev from the Troika at the 14th Party Congress in December 1925.

Serge mentioned in his Memoirs that he passed through Moscow in the spring of 1925 and learned that Zinoviev and Kamenev were about to be overthrown at the upcoming Party

⁸¹ (...continued)

shot with sawn-off rifles in the face and chest. His murderers were never discovered, the Leningrad Committee prevented a public funeral for him (he had fought in the revolution) and his headstone was smashed into pieces. See Serge, Memoirs, p., 214-215, and 242-243.

⁸² Memoirs, p. 208.

⁸³ Trotsky's secretary and son of Boris Mikhailovich Eltsin, an old Bolshevik and Opposition leader who spent time with Serge in Orenburg and became a character in his novel Midnight In The Century. Victor Borisovich Eltsin, who had the "cool temperament of a tactician" spent five years in prison and was then deported to Archangel. Deutscher called him one of Trotsky's "gifted secretaries." See Deutscher, The Prophet Unarmed, p. 431, and Serge, Memoirs, p. 209, 307.

Congress.⁸⁴ Yet he expressed surprise when they were outmaneuvered by Stalin at the Congress. The action confused the Left momentarily: Serge thought the bureaucratic regime organized by Zinoviev couldn't get any worse, and thought any change "must offer some opportunity for purification. I was very much mistaken..."⁸⁵ In fact the victory of the Stalin-Bukharin-Rykov coalition over the Zinoviev group, which had controlled only Leningrad, gave Stalin the opportunity to shift the blame for everything -- including the defeats in Bulgaria and Germany, the bloody episode in Estonia, the revival of class-distinctions, two million unemployed, scarce goods, the simmering conflict with the peasantry, the extinction of all democracy, the Purges and repression in the Party and the campaign of slander against Trotsky⁸⁶ -- on his erstwhile colleagues Zinoviev and Kamenev.

As much as Serge had detested Zinoviev and his style of politics, he admitted Zinoviev was sincere in his opposition to socialism in one country, in his internationalism. Zinoviev's own bureaucratic practices in the period up to 1925 were now used against him. Zinoviev and Kamenev had now awakened to the fact that their policies had not only sponsored the growth of a nascent bourgeoisie, but had allowed bureaucratic maneuvering to

⁸⁴ This trip of Serge's, while he was on assignment for the Comintern in Vienna, most likely was on Comintern business. It was probably upon his return to Vienna that he put in his categorical request to return to the Soviet Union.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 210. This error of Serge's seems incredible given his earlier political insights. Serge quoted Mrachkovsky who opposed uniting with Zinoviev, who "would end by deserting us and Stalin would trick us." Ibid. Yet Serge's position in December 1925 points to the level of confusion within the Party as to who represented the real danger and to Stalin's ability to bore from within and cover his tracks, at this point. Serge's confusion can be seen as a reflection of the situation within the Party, in which alliances still shifted and had not solidified yet into more permanent tendencies.

⁸⁶ ibid. p. 211.

destroy the Bolshevik party in a real sense, by diluting it and robbing it of political practice, its 'substance.'

Stalin soon attacked the Leningrad machine controlled by Zinoviev, which Zinoviev apparently thought was impregnable. Serge said the machine Zinoviev had forged since 1918 crumbled within a week under the 'hammer-blows' of Gusev, sent by the Central Committee to instal new committees. Serge's Opposition circle had walked out and abstained in the Leningrad faction fight. They were shocked, shortly thereafter, when Trotsky had concluded an agreement with Zinoviev. "How could we sit at the same table with the bureaucrats who had hunted and slandered us -- who had murdered the principles and ideas of the Party?"⁸⁷

Zinoviev and Kamenev signed a declaration which recognized Trotsky's position of 1923 on the internal Party regime as correct. Serge's view of the 'overnight' change in his comrades in the Leningrad Party was magnanimous: he reflected that they must have been tremendously relieved not to have to fabricate lies anymore. Whereas they attacked Trotsky just days before, they now spoke of him admiringly.⁸⁸ Zinoviev and Kamenev presented Trotsky with letters as evidence of their conspiracy with Stalin, Rykov and Bukharin in the smear campaign against him.

Serge's Leningrad Center numbered some twenty militants. The Zinoviev tendency in Leningrad numbered more than 500. When the Zinovievists demanded the immediate fusion of the two groups and asked for the Left Opposition's name lists, Serge's group balked. "What would they be up to tomorrow?" Serge, Chadayev and others immediately set up clandestine meetings with a view to recruiting as many as possible to the Left Opposition for the time of the merger of the two oppositions. Afraid of being swamped, they wanted the two tendencies to face each other with

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 212.

⁸⁸ Serge, Ibid., p. 212.

organizations of equal size. Serge reported they were successful, with more than 400 organized on the day of the merger.⁸⁹

While they were recruiting to the Trotskyist tendency Serge followed Chadayev and Nechayev to Moscow to brief Trotsky. Trotsky was "shivering with fever; his lips were violet-colored, but his shoulders were still set firmly and the cast of his face displayed intelligence and will."⁹⁰ Trotsky justified the amalgamation of the two tendencies to them on the basis that the salvation of the revolution depended on it. Serge noted that Trotsky's house was being watched and photographed from across the way by the GPU. Visitors were instructed to pretend to blow their noses as they left the house.

The unification of the two Leningrad oppositions was brought about by Preobrazhensky and Smilga, who were sent to Leningrad to sort out their differences. Serge's impressions of these men in 1926 merits inclusion here:

"Preobrazhensky had the broad features and short auburn beard that befitted a man of the people. He had driven himself so hard that during the meetings it seemed that he might at any moment drop off to sleep; but his brain was still fresh, and crammed with statistics on the agrarian problem.

Smilga, an economist and former army leader who in 1917 had been Lenin's confidential agent in the Baltic fleet, was a fair-haired intellectual in his forties with spectacles, a chin-beard, and thinning front hair, ordinary to look at and distinctly the armchair sort. He spoke for a whole evening in a little room to about fifty workers who could not move at all, so closely were they squeezed together. A Latvian giant with gingerish hair and an impassive face scrutinized all who came in. Smilga, sitting on a stool in the middle of the room, spoke, in an expert's tone and without one agitational phrase, of production, unemployment, grain and budgetary figures, and of the Plan that we were hotly advocating. Not since the first days of the Revolution had the Party's

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 213.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

leadership been seen in an atmosphere of poverty and simplicity like this, face to face with the militants of the rank and file.⁹¹

Serge's recollection of meetings such as the one just described provide us with much more than just an account of how and when the Opposition met, what they discussed, and what they did, although his Memoirs are an important historical source for that as well. Serge's eye for penetrating detail, his descriptive depth, his ability to sum up a figure's character through a physical description provide flesh and blood to our knowledge of the life and death struggle of those years in the Bolshevik Party. The Memoirs allude to theory more than working at it; they are very much an insider's account. Serge's chronicle of the struggle, however, of the Opposition's developing political battle[s], is an indispensable companion to the minutes, resolutions and documents of the battles themselves. In other works⁹², Serge tried his hand at political analysis, historical interpretation and theoretical questions, sometimes more successfully than others.

3.8 The fight to be heard ... for five minutes

Because Serge's account of the activities of the Left Opposition in the years 1926-1928 is markedly more intimate than the histories and even Trotsky's My Life in places, it is worth including here some of the more important encounters and episodes.

Serge wrote that the battle of ideas took place on three issues: Soviet agriculture, Party democracy, and the Chinese

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 214.

⁹² For example, Serge's Year One of the Russian Revolution; his Destiny of a Revolution; From Lenin to Stalin; Portrait de Staline; his articles on Germany, the Chinese revolution, industrialization, bureaucratization and the purges, etc.

Revolution.⁹³ Party discussions at that point consisted in long monologues by Party hacks justifying 'socialism in one country,' and denouncing the Opposition. According to Serge, everything said on China was dictated by the bureaucracy and was completely falsified.

Crude maneuvers such as long lists of speakers were used to prevent Oppositionists from speaking. Serge and Chadayev were effectively clandestine, and thus able to get on the list. Oppositionists were given just five minutes, so they adopted a style to get as much out in five minutes as possible before the shouts drowned them out.

Serge was able to score a few points in these prepared five minute bursts; but to have argue in this way was profoundly demoralizing. As their Party 'comrades' kept up their shouts of "Slanderers! Traitors!" Serge wrote that they suddenly felt "that the enemy was in front of us and prison was a step away."⁹⁴ The points Serge was able to score were meager: on the occasion of Adolf Abramavovich Joffe's suicide⁹⁵, Serge was able to render homage and closed by demanding from the cell Secretary details on how and why Joffe died. But the cell Secretary was able to bury Joffe under a mound of memoranda. Demoralized,

⁹³ Serge, Memoirs, p. 215.

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 218.

⁹⁵ Adolf Abramovich Joffe, "an outstanding figure" (p. 136) of the Russian Revolution killed himself, leaving a political testament addressed to Trotsky, which was first stolen by the GPU and later released to him. Joffe's experience included prisons, exile, the revolutions of 1905 and 1917, Brest-Litovsk, the German Revolution, the Chinese Revolution, embassies in Tokyo and Vienna. He was 47. His testament affirmed his right to commit suicide as a revolutionary act, as a "protest against those who have reduced the Party to such a condition that it is totally incapable of reacting against this disgrace" (the expulsion of Trotsky and Zinoviev from the Central Committee. He addressed friendly criticisms to Trotsky, and "exhorted him to intransigence against orthodox Leninism" (Memoirs, p. 229).

Serge and Chadayev despaired of even trying to speak. Then after one night when they had kept quiet, they scored a moral victory: the normally apathetic audience cried for the two of them to answer the 'activists.' Serge and Chadayev won an extra vote that evening and discovered that forty workers supported them discreetly, with an equal amount of sympathizers around them. Learning from other sources, they discovered this was the general situation throughout the party.

Serge described another meeting they held with Zinoviev and Trotsky in a small room packed with fifty people. When a woman worker asked Trotsky what would happen if the Opposition were expelled from the Party, Trotsky explained that "nothing can really cut us off from our Party."⁹⁶ Serge commented that what was reassuring about this meeting was watching the 'men of the proletarian dictatorship' returning to the poor districts to gain support "from man to man." Despite the courage, simplicity, and humanity exhibited by the former leaders, which Serge so aptly conveyed (and which he excelled at describing in his novels), the sense of tragedy was already present. Serge accompanied Trotsky home from the meeting and reported:

"In the street Leon Davidovich put up his overcoat collar and lowered the peak of his cap so as not to be recognized. He looked like an old intellectual in the underground of long ago, true as ever after twenty years of grind and a few dazzling victories. We approached a cabman and bargained for the fare, for we had little money,. The cabman, a bearded peasant straight out of old Russia, leaned down and said, 'For you, the fare is nothing. Get inside, comrade. You are Trotsky, surely?' The cap was not enough of a disguise for the man of the Revolution. The Old Man had a slight smile of amusement: 'Don't tell any one that this happened. Everybody knows that cabmen belong to the petty-bourgeoisie, whose favor can only discredit us....'"⁹⁷

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 219.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 220.

Serge's description is amusing, tender, and tragic. The attraction of Serge to the Opposition is obvious, and works quite well for the reader as well. Serge's talent as a writer and spokesman the Opposition, presenting the human element of the Opposition, as well as the distillation of its overall political stance, is still effective in winning sympathy for its politics.

Serge wrote of another Opposition meeting, which took place in his apartment, around the kitchen table. On this occasion, Karl Bernardovich Radek was present, who gave "an impression of extreme intelligence, which was, at first encounter, disagreeable because of a certain flippancy; but beneath the sarcastic retailer of anecdotes, the man of principle shone through."⁹⁸ The meeting was cut short at midnight by a telephone call warning them that the GPU was on its way to arrest them all.

Political life had deteriorated greatly by this point. It was difficult to maintain morale. The Central Committee had gangs of 'activist' thugs out in the streets breaking up 'illegal meetings' by force.⁹⁹ The situation was grim, and Serge was certain that they would be defeated since the mass of workers were indifferent to their struggle. He confided this to Trotsky, who told him: "There is always some risk to be run. Sometimes you finish like Liebknecht and sometimes like Lenin."¹⁰⁰ Serge summed up his own feeling:

"...even if there were only one chance in a hundred for the regeneracy of the Revolution and its workers' democracy, that chance had to be taken at all costs. I was unable to confess these sentiments openly to any one. To the comrades who, under the firs in the

⁹⁸ Ibid, p. 221.

⁹⁹ The presence of street thugs terrorizing opposition is strongly reminiscent of tactics more commonly reserved for fascist dictatorships.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. p. 220 .

cemetery, or on a waste plot near a hospital, or in poverty-stricken houses, demanded some promise of victory from me, I would answer that the struggle would be prolonged and harsh. So long as I confined this way of talking to personal conversations with a few people, it worked, it made their faces harden; but if was used against a more numerous audience, it cast a chill. 'You behave too much like an intellectual,' I was told by one of my friends in our Centre. Other agitators were lavish with promises of victory and I think that they themselves lived on such hopes."¹⁰¹

We learn from Serge that the Program of the Opposition was a collective effort, with Zinoviev writing the chapters on agriculture and the International with Kamenev; Trotsky wrote the chapter on industrialization; and Smilga and Piatakov edited the draft. The Program served not only to demonstrate that the Opposition's ideas represented the way forward, but also to expose the absence of ideas put forward by the Party. Serge noted that the combined effort of drawing up the Opposition program was the last time collective thinking was allowed in the Party, and even that was cut short by the GPU raids.¹⁰²

With all legal means of expression closed not only to the Party Opposition, but also to the anarchists, syndicalists and Maximalists, the Central Committee controlled absolutely the dissemination of the printed word. Nonetheless, the Platform of the Opposition appeared clandestinely.

The programme of the Opposition attacked the growth under NEP of the kulak, trader and bureaucrat as anti-socialist forces. Also under fire were the low wages, high unemployment, and high indirect taxation which increased the misery of the masses. Calling for the development of Kolkhozes, a progressive tax-system, the creation of new industry (attacking the 'pitifully weak version of the Five Year Plan'), and the abolition of the State alcohol trade, the Opposition also

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 220-221.

¹⁰² Memoirs, p. 222.

demanded that the Soviets be restored, self-determination of nationalities and revitalization of the trade unions and the Party. The Comintern was also heavily criticized, especially for the policies in China which led to a bloody disaster.

3.9 The Revolution's Tenth Anniversary

Serge saw the tenth anniversary of the Russian Revolution as that point in which the "exhausted Revolution had turned full circle against itself."¹⁰³ Elsewhere, Serge had described the anniversary as the realization of Soviet thermidor, finishing the cycle of the Revolution's first ten exultant years.¹⁰⁴ Serge's description of the speeches of Trotsky and Zinoviev on this occasion, barely audible under the torrent of abuse, including the throwing of books (Trotsky sarcastically commented: "Your books are unreadable nowadays, but they are still useful for knocking people down....") suggests that the rage expressed by the Party faithful came from what they saw as treasonable conduct. After all, the Opposition was also part of the ruling bureaucracy.

One of the last hurrahs of the Opposition took place on the tenth anniversary of the Revolution, Nov. 7, 1927. The Opposition had decided to take part in the anniversary demonstration/parade. This public manifestation of the Opposition, according to Isaac Deutscher, who uses Serge's description as a reference, amounted more to an appeal to the Party than an attempt to go over the party directly to the masses. Carrying banners proclaiming the slogans of the Opposition, as well as placards with Zinoviev and Trotsky's names, the Oppositionists were attacked by Party activists, beaten, dispersed and charged by mounted militiamen. Deutscher wrote that the Opposition was defeated in this demonstration,

¹⁰³ Memoirs, p. 225.

¹⁰⁴ In "Trente Ans Apres La Revolution russe."

not only by Stalin's readiness and repressive response, but by the underlying contradiction in the Opposition's action: a public demonstration of opposition to the conduct and policies of the Party, while maintaining loyalty and self-discipline within its ranks.¹⁰⁵

Serge's description of the brawl which took place, though nearly quoted in full by Deutscher, takes on a different meaning. Deutscher describes Serge's brush with an angry crowd, stressing Serge's physical and by implication political isolation. Deutscher translates the workers silence following the party activist's threat as ominous. In Serge's description, after shouting the names of Trotsky and Zinoviev to an astonished crowd, an

"organizer, roused from his sluggishness, answered in a spiteful tone: '--to the dustbin!' No one echoed him, but all at once I had the very distinct impression that I was about to be cut to ribbons. Burly characters sprang up from nowhere and eyed me up and down, a little hesitant because after all I might be some high functionary. A student walked across the clear space that had arisen all around me and came to whisper in my ear, 'Let's be off, it might take a turn for the worse. I'll go with you so that you won't be hit from behind.'"

Deutscher's translation imbues Serge's sluggish organizer's shout with "threat and fury" and the lack of 'echo,' the workers remaining silent. The difference here is that Serge leaves the impression that although the crowd was astonished to hear the names of the Opposition leaders shouted, their lack of response to the organizer was not complicity with him, but refusal to take up the action against Serge. Serge goes on to describe how burly characters sprang up from nowhere and began to eye him, making him fear for his safety. Deutscher's rendering of the episode leaves the impression that the crowd, though probably intimidated, was with the Party. Serge on the other hand,

¹⁰⁵ Deutscher discusses this demonstration in Vol. 2, The Prophet Unarmed, Trotsky: 1921-1929, pp. 372-376.

describes a non-complicit and shocked crowd, that although intimidated, would not go against the Opposition, and thus the need for the appearance of the 'burly' thugs. In the end, the Party through the press accused the Opposition of a mini-insurrection that day. In fact, Serge described battles between hundreds of oppositionists with the militia on horseback.¹⁰⁶

Louis Fischer was also on hand that day, and described it as filled with tension. Rumors had circulated that the Red Army would make a bid for power against the Stalin regime but nothing happened. Fischer was in Moscow, Serge in Leningrad, and the demonstrations differed in degree of violence. According to Fischer, the Chinese students of Moscow's Sun Yat-Sen University "threw Trotzkyist slogans in the air"¹⁰⁷ and the GPU moved in to arrest some of them. Later pictures of Trotsky were torn down from buildings, and when Trotsky and Zinoviev, appeared they were not allowed to speak.

The subtle difference between Serge's and Deutscher's account leaves intact a common judgment -- that the Opposition was defeated, that thermidor had been realized. Both accounts agree that the Opposition could not rouse the crowd or masses to engage in action against the Stalinist regime, against the Party. Serge understood the reason; the Opposition had been too loyal, had allowed party discipline to choke off its ability to command a platform for its ideas in the society at large. Trotsky had succumbed to the oft repeated criticism of "outsider" to the Bolshevik party by trying too hard to prove his loyalty, which proved to be his undoing. Trotsky couldn't have acted alone, nonetheless, and the other Oppositionists were perhaps even more loyal to the party than Trotsky, judging by the lengths they later went to, to remain within its ranks.

¹⁰⁶ Memoirs, p. 226.

¹⁰⁷ Louis Fischer, Men and Politics, An Autobiography, Jonathan Cape Ltd., London, Nov. 1941, pp. 91-92.

Serge would later say, one had to have been in the Party to understand its psychology.¹⁰⁸

3.10 Expulsion

On November 14, 1927, one week after the demonstration, the Opposition was expelled from the Party. The expulsions were published on the 16th of November. The ousters ensured that the Opposition would have no voice in the upcoming 15th Party Congress. Once out of the Party, the former Central Committee members had to move out of the Kremlin, where they had resided. Trotsky had already vacated the Kremlin, and Serge went to see Zinoviev as he was moving. Serge found Zinoviev and Radek, amidst their belongings. Zinoviev, "feigned a supreme tranquility"¹⁰⁹ taking with him only a poignant death mask of Lenin. Kamenev dropped by and Serge noted that his beard had turned completely white, though his eyes remained 'unclouded.' That was the last time Serge saw Kamenev.¹¹⁰ Serge's impression of Radek, in the process of sorting and destroying papers, surrounded by books is very revealing of his character: Radek confided that he deplored the fact that the Opposition had followed Trotsky's advice and broke with the Group of Fifteen (Sapronov and V. Smirnov). The Fifteen had called the ruling group a bureaucratic police regime which had replaced the dictatorship of the proletariat. Radek also bemoaned that

"We've been absolute idiots! We haven't a halfpenny, when we could have kept back some pretty spoils of war for ourselves! Today we are being killed off through lack of money. We with our celebrated revolutionary honesty, we've just been over-scrupulous sods of

¹⁰⁸ See, for example, Victor Serge, From Lenin to Stalin, p. 86, Portrait de Staline, (chapter XXI), "The Third Moscow Trial," in La Revolution Proletarienne, March 1938, Seize fusilees, p. 19, 31-34, Life and Death of Leon Trotsky, (with Natalia Sedova), pp. , and Memoirs, pp. 333-334.

¹⁰⁹ Memoirs, p. 227.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 228.

intellectuals.' Then without a pause, as though it were about the most commonplace matter: 'Joffe killed himself tonight...'"

Serge's unique talent of summoning up the multifaceted character of these two revolutionaries by means of a quote, or a physical detail (the beard gone white but eyes are clear) renders a sense of intimacy with these great actors of the revolution at their low ebb. Serge's motive was not simply to reveal unattractive characteristics of Zinoviev or Radek, for example, but to fairly portray personal characteristics which form a part of political motivation. Without belaboring the point about the role of personality in politics, Serge also created very effective literature. Hence, the normally high strung Zinoviev appeared tranquil, alone with an abandoned death mask of Lenin full of grief and mortality. Radek interspersed political considerations with base personal complaints and seemed to lack human feeling in his reaction to Joffe's suicide. It was Serge's ability to sketch these personal portraits that rounds out our knowledge of these political figures. It is as if, by drawing out character traits while delineating political alignment, Serge evoked the whole person, albeit refracted through Serge's own values of rigorous revolutionary honesty. The sum adds to a heightened understanding for the reader of the actors in the Russian revolution and hence the process itself.

3.11 Joffe's funeral, exile of Oppositionists ... the issue of capitulation

Joffe's suicide was a landmark in the inner-Party struggles. Louis Fischer had gone to see Joffe a week before his suicide, and described him as extremely ill and racked with pain, though curious about the revolutionary consciousness of the European proletariat. Joffe asked Fischer whether he believed revolution was around the corner in Germany, China,

England, America. Fischer replied in the negative to each, distressing Joffe whose body was already tortured with pain¹¹¹. Joffe wrote in his testament that his death was "a gesture of protest against those who have reduced the Party to such a condition that it is totally incapable of reacting against this disgrace" (the expulsion of Trotsky and Zinoviev from the CC). His funeral was the Opposition's last public demonstration and Trotsky's last public appearance.

The GPU had tried to prevent the funeral from becoming a show of strength of the Opposition. Both Trotsky and Rakovsky spoke, and the crowd protected Trotsky, who told them:

Yoffe left us, not because he did not wish to fight, but because he lacked the physical strength for fighting. He feared to become a burden on those engaged in the struggle. His life, not his suicide, should serve as a model to those who are left behind. The struggle goes on. Everyone remains at his post. Let nobody leave.¹¹²

Serge was also at the funeral. It reminded him of another demonstration of different persecuted oppositionists at the same cemetery just six years before: Kropotkin's funeral. Serge remarked that there was a secret justice in the persecution that was now descending on 'us'-- who had persecuted the anarchists in the Revolution's early years. (1921) Serge's curious statement can be interpreted in two ways: 1) that his allegiance to the Bolsheviks, albeit to the Oppositional wing within was tinged with guilt for the way Bolsheviks had treated their opponents in years of the Red Terror (there is something almost religious in this form of guilt); or 2) that Serge was most at home as a marginal, persecuted Oppositionist (which in fact is what his whole life experience had been.)

¹¹¹ Fischer, op cit., p. 92-93.

¹¹² Deutscher, op. cit., pp. 381-384. Fischer also describes the funeral and the crowd protecting Trotsky in his autobiography, p. 93.

The Fifteenth Party Congress saw the Centre and Right congratulating themselves for successes in all fields. One of these important 'successes' was the expunging of the 'Menshevik' Social Democratic' deviation on its way to becoming a 'Second Party' spearheading 'third force reaction.' [This was the language used to characterize criticism.] Bukharin took the floor at the Congress to denounce the crimes of Trotskyism. He explained that Trotskyism was preparing to establish a second party which would rally behind it all disaffected and those who hated the regime: in this way a split would undermine the dictatorship of the proletariat and the Opposition would thus spearhead the hidden 'third force reaction.'¹¹³

Bukharin's argument resonated within the Opposition, which was divided on the question of capitulation. Serge was caustic about certain Oppositionists' desire to capitulate in order to prove their loyalty in the face of the purging, and wrote that the 'third force' was "already organized in the heart of the bureaucracy."¹¹⁴ The transformation which Zinoviev and the other capitulationists from Leningrad could not see had already begun in the Party and signaled the end of all vital initiative in the Party.

The expulsion of the Opposition marked the death of the Party. A party without any discussion or dissent is not a political party in the real sense of the word. Yet the Zinovievites were certain that there was no political life outside the bureaucratic machine that they had helped to build, that no humiliation was too great to find a way back in. Serge wrote that Zinoviev had passed a note to Trotsky: "Leon Davidovich, the hour has come when we should have the courage to capitulate...." Trotsky: 'If that kind of courage were enough, the revolution would have been won all over the world by

¹¹³ Serge quoted Bukharin in Memoirs, p. 231.

¹¹⁴ Memoirs, p. 232.

now...."¹¹⁵ Zinoviev and Kamenev recanted, which Serge said was seen by the Trotskyist Opposition as political suicide. Although it was not evident yet how far the hunt for enemies would go, Serge saw clearly enough that the Party was dead and loyalty oaths were fruitless. Yet the blow was deep. The psychology of being a Bolshevik Party member meant that finding oneself cut off from the Party was tantamount to religious excommunication -- it was political death. That psychology prevented the Opposition from taking their ideas to the masses at large, and in a sense represented a form of contempt for them, since the notion that thoughts must be filtered through the Party represented a form of elitist contempt for the ability of the ordinary worker to judge for himself which policies were correct. Although Serge suffered less from this way of thinking, no one in the Opposition campaigned for such broad democratic ideas, at least not in 1927. If one reads what Trotsky had to say about democratization, it is all about inner-party democracy. Serge on the other hand challenged the decision to ban political parties, not just the ban on factions in the party. By the time Trotsky wrote Revolution Betrayed (1936) he called for a multi-party system, but in 1927 the struggle was to cleanse the Party from its bureaucratic, opportunist and non-Bolshevik (in the Leninist sense) direction.

Trotsky's position on the Party is at face value internally contradictory. By refusing to go outside the Party, or indeed to form a new Party, Trotsky affirmed his belief that even if it were not possible to regenerate the party from within, it remained necessary to demonstrate the impossibility by trying (and failing).¹¹⁶ Trotsky shared with other Oppositionists and

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Today Trotskyists are still divided on this dilemma: When the American section of the Trotskyist Fourth International expelled its opposition in recent years, the expelled opposition immediately split into two organizations.
(continued...)

the capitulators an acceptance of one-party rule. Serge was more evasive on the question, as he later would be in defining the class nature of the Stalinist state. Without saying directly that it was time to form a new Party, Serge wrote of the dangers of totalitarianism, of the consequences of party patriotism, and of the blind loyalty which prevented his comrade Oppositionists from taking their fight to the society at large. Serge was still in the Party and this is probably the reason for his elusive approach to the question. After 1928 Serge stated his position more clearly, as we shall see.

Once the Opposition had been expelled the Soviet press overflowed with the most fantastic charges against them. Although no "insurrectionary plots" had been contemplated in 1927, Serge wrote that the question of a Trotskyist coup had been discussed at the end of 1925 and beginning of 1926, because it was plainly obvious that Trotsky would have had the support of the army and even the GPU. According to Serge, Trotsky dismissed out of hand the possibility of a seizure of power

"out of respect for an unwritten law that forbade any recourse to military mutiny within a Socialist regime; for it was all too likely that power won in this way, even with the noblest intentions, would eventually finish in military and police dictatorship, which was anti-Socialist by definition."¹¹⁷

Serge agreed with Trotsky on the question of ends and means, since the end 'commands its own means' which in this case would be entirely inappropriate. Trotsky himself admitted that a coup against the leadership would have been relatively easy

¹¹⁶ (...continued)

One organization wanted only to be recognized as an open tendency of the Party which had just expelled them, hence publicly stating their aim of being reintegrated; the other formed a separate public organization, effectively recognizing the 'bankruptcy' of the party which had expelled them and aiming to replace it as the new American section of the Fourth International.

¹¹⁷ Memoirs, p. 234-5.

and bloodless, "but its consequence would have been a speedier triumph for the very bureaucracy and Bonapartism against which the Left Opposition took its stand"¹¹⁸

It is difficult to dispute this declaration of revolutionary principle, yet at the same time, one must question it in light of subsequent developments. In today's Soviet Union, Trotsky is attacked as the 'super-industrializer' hence super-Stalinist¹¹⁹, yet his program of industrialization was entirely different than Stalin's crude interpretation imposed on Soviet society in the first Five Year Plans. The crucial elements of difference included force and tempo. Trotsky saw industrialization as a way of regenerating class consciousness as well as solving the economic problems of the country; his program included broad inner party democracy as the only way to ensure creative debate on the complex way forward¹²⁰. Restoration of the Soviets would have ensured democratic participation of the society at large in political decision-making, and genuine planning in industry and agriculture (as opposed to planning by bureaucratic fiat) would necessitate work-place democracy. Given Trotsky's adherence to this policy which presumably would have been put into practice in power, the outcome of industrialization would have saved millions of lives. In this respect, Trotsky's refusal to employ all available means to defeat Stalin seems irresponsible. One can say with relative certainty that in his place, Lenin would have seized power. Nevertheless, Trotsky and Serge's arguments were powerful and command respect for their adherence to rigorous revolutionary principles.

The capitulators were offered posts far from the nerve centers of Leningrad and Moscow. Rakovsky was sent to Astrakhan,

¹¹⁸ Quoted in Serge's Memoirs, p. 235.

¹¹⁹ See, for example, Dmitry Volkogonov, "The Stalin Phenomenon" in Literaturnaya gazeta, Dec. 9, 1987.

¹²⁰ See Trotsky, The New Course, New Park Publications, London, 1943, 1972, chap. III, pp. 18-27.

Radek and Smilga, among others, to Siberia, Preobrazhensky to the Urals. Trotsky refused to agree to such a post and was forcibly removed from Moscow and sent to Alma Ata. Natalia Sedova's account of their 'removal' is poignant and symbolic.¹²¹

A few days before Trotsky was forcibly removed, Serge went to say good bye to the Old man at Beloborodov's residence in the House of the Soviets in Granovsky. Comrade Oppositionists kept a constant watch on Trotsky while they themselves were being watched by the GPU. Serge described 'the Bolshevik from the Urals who in 1918 had the task of deciding the lot of the Romanov dynasty and had even lately been People's Commissar of the Interior'¹²² as still majestic: "his hair standing nearly white on his head, ... he exhaled a fierce, caged energy." Arrest for everyone was around the corner, and they all knew it. Serge and Trotsky discussed the Opposition abroad. Serge's Oppositional work was to take on an even more urgent significance since outside support must now more than ever be built in the face of enforced political inactivity within the USSR. Serge had collaborated with Magdeleine and Maurice Paz in Paris in the publication of the journal Contre le Courant¹²³. Trotsky read and approved of the journal, telling Serge he must immediately go to France to work on the spot. Trotsky added, "We

¹²¹ See Leon Trotsky, My Life, pp. 562-571.

¹²² Memoirs, p. 233,

¹²³ The title came from a phrase of Lenin. The journal staunchly defended the Opposition against the campaign of persecution,. The Paz circle in France later grew and a new bi-monthly journal took the place of Contre le Courant, called La Revolution proletarienne. Its contributors were mainly revolutionary syndicalists and literary figures including Georges Duhamel, Charles Vildrac, Georges Pioch, Leon Werth, Marcel Martinet, and Henri Poulaille. These French intellectuals later waged an international campaign to secure Serge's release from the Stalin's prison camps. See Richard Greeman, "Victor Serge: The Making of a Novelist (1890-1928)" unpublished dissertation, p. 393.

have begun a fight to the finish, which may last for years and require many sacrifices. I am leaving for Central Asia: you try and leave for Europe. Good luck!"¹²⁴

Serge's work with the French comrades was not simply literary. He had been the political guide of visiting French revolutionaries and had belonged to the French group of Bolsheviks in Russia. Rosmer had written of Serge earlier in 1920¹²⁵ describing him as the best possible guide in Russia because of his astute political sense and intimate knowledge of Russian and international affairs. When Gerard Rosenthal and Pierre Naville, two French surrealists who later became prominent Trotskyists (Rosenthal became Trotsky's lawyer and Naville has remained a Trotskyist activist to this day in France) were selected as delegates of the French Communist Party to attend the Tenth Anniversary Celebration of the Revolution, Serge took them around Moscow. They accompanied Serge to keep watch over Joffe's body prior to the funeral, and Serge took them to visit both Zinoviev and Trotsky. The French comrades had questioned Zinoviev on the prospects for the Opposition in the International. His crude approach shocked Serge, Rosenthal and Naville. Zinoviev:

"We are starting the Zimmerwald Movement all over again...we are already stronger than they were. We have cadres practically everywhere. In our time, history moves faster..."¹²⁶

Zinoviev's statement left Naville and Rosenthal incredulous: but Serge assured them that he believed Zinoviev was serious.

Serge began to concentrate his Oppositional activity on literary activity in France. His relationship to the French political and literary scene was of critical importance for

¹²⁴ Ibid, p. 234. Serge did not reach Paris for another nine years, three of them in captivity.

¹²⁵ Rosmer, Moscow Under Lenin, Monthly Review Press, New York and London, 1971, pp. 35-37.

¹²⁶ Memoirs, p. 231.

several reasons: it allowed him to earn a living in the years 1927-1936 by publishing in France (he was prevented from publishing a single line within the Soviet Union); he was provided a platform for the ideas of the Left Opposition in Europe, and thereby to win the allegiance of comrades in France, Belgium and Spain, and to create a public for the novels he wrote in the next five years; and he built a reputation for himself as a revolutionary writer and serious novelist. That public was mobilized in his defense when Serge was arrested.

3.12 Serge's writings on the Chinese revolution

The journals Clarte, Contre le Courant, and La Lutte des Classes provided Serge his platform for disseminating the politics of the Opposition. The Opposition disagreed with Stalin on both domestic and foreign policy: the industrialization debate at home, and Comintern conduct abroad, principally in China. Accordingly, Serge's most important articles in Clarte were "Vers L'Industrialization"¹²⁷ and a five part series on the Chinese revolution called "La Lutte des classes dans la revolution chinoise."¹²⁸

Serge's articles on China are important not only for the rigorous analysis put forward, but because their appearance in Clarte turned the attention of the French-speaking communist

¹²⁷ Clarte, Part I, No. 15, Nov. 1927, pp. 436-442, and Part II, No. 16, Dec. 1927, pp. 485-491.

¹²⁸ There were seven articles in all. Six appeared in Clarte, the first "Le Bolshevisme et l'Asie" Clarte, New Series, No. 7, 15 Mar. 1927, p. 195-199; then the five part series entitled "La lutte des classes dans la Revolution chinoise" appearing in Clarte, New Series, No. 9, 15 mai 1927, pp. 259-266; No. 11, 15 juillet 1927, pp. 323-329; No. 12, 15 aout 1927, pp. 356-362; No. 13, 15 sept. 1927, pp. 382-392; No. 14, 15 oct. 1927, pp. 406-412; and the last article "Canton," appeared in La lutte des classes, Num. 1, fev-mars 1928. Clarte was a Marxist and Communist journal, independent of the Communist Party, but controlled by it. The two editors, Marcel Fourier and Pierre Naville, both belonged to the Party.

movement to the Chinese revolution and the debate it had provoked within the CPUSSR and Comintern. Thus Serge was able to influence political debates in France.¹²⁹ The articles were to have a profound impact on Serge's future political life, as they were the immediate cause of his expulsion from the Russian Communist Party. The five part series, plus two additional articles, put together make a 180 page book¹³⁰. Serge's work on China remains relatively unknown. The richness of information and the perspectives and analysis Serge developed were later to appear in the classic studies of the Chinese Revolution, such as Harold Isaac's The Tragedy of the Chinese Revolution, and Trotsky's Problems of the Chinese Revolution.

Pierre Naville¹³¹, who visited Serge in the Soviet Union in 1927 found Serge very preoccupied with the Chinese question. Serge himself said he lectured on China to clandestine meetings of Oppositionists, discussing the problems with the Official

¹²⁹ Pierre Naville, in his preface to the French and Spanish recompilation of Serge's Clarte articles, wrote that throughout 1926 any articles in Clarte on China simply reflected Comintern line uncritically. That changed when the writings of Trotsky and Zinoviev began to filter out of the USSR, and with the appearance of Serge's articles, which "established the real characteristics of the 'class struggle in the Chinese revolution'" and "notably clarified the errors of the Comintern." Naville commented that Serge's articles made Clarte realize it had committed a series of errors, and turned the attention of the French leftists to the Chinese revolution. Pierre Naville, Preface, La Revolution China 1926-1928, pp. 8-10.

¹³⁰ Published in France as La Revolution chinoise, 1927-1929, Paris, Savelli, 1977; and in Mexico by Vlady, as La Revolution China 1926-1928, Mexico, Editorial Domes, S.A., 1984.

¹³¹ Naville, who later wrote extensively on China, wrote the preface to the French and Spanish editions of the collection of Serge's articles on China.

line on China, and examining Mao Tse Tung's articles, which Serge found noteworthy.¹³²

Serge was well informed on events by comrades who had returned from China, including Joffe, Radek (the Rector of the Chinese University in Moscow), Zinoviev and Trotsky. The only Western sources available to Serge were Le Temps, the conservative French newspaper, Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung, the historian Rene Grousset, the libertarian novelist Paul Morand, the reactionary catholic Henri Massis, and Romain Rolland.¹³³

In order to write his analysis of China, Serge immersed himself in Chinese history from 1911 to 1927, basing himself on a rigorous Marxist analysis, and above all on clear concepts of revolution. Amidst all the confusing arguments on the special class conditions in China, Serge stressed key components for revolution that the revolutionary party must heed. These components, including the independence of the proletarian party -- even if in embryo, and the hegemony of the proletariat¹³⁴, emphasized the primary, essential role of class struggle in history¹³⁵ in China as in Russia, a fact which had been lost by the leadership. On the 'sacred union' with the national petty-bourgeoisie against the foreign imperialists, Serge quoted Lenin, reminding the reader that political power rests on economic power and in class divided society the government can only represent the possessing classes. The 'sacred union' in

¹³² Memoirs, p. 220.

¹³³ "Le Bolshevisme et l'Asie," Clarte, New Series, Num. 7, 14 Mars 1927. Serge also had access to the publications of the Communist International, and to the French Communist journal, L'Humanite.

¹³⁴ Victor Serge, Clarte, num. 12, 15 August 1927, p. 105 of the Spanish recompilation. Serge stressed, quoting Lenin, that communism should not be subordinated to Sunyatsenism, nor the Communist Party to the Kuomintang.

¹³⁵ Ibid, p. 141, Spanish edition.

practice meant the abdication of the proletariat. The bloc of four classes, Serge wrote, was a regression from Marxism to liberalism,¹³⁶ reminiscent of Menshevik confusion in 1905. Serge added that the revolutionary vanguard must guard against adventurism and premature insurrections, and most importantly, must stress the absolute necessity of creating Soviets, organs of dual power, without which the Communist Party substitutes itself for the action of the masses and must necessarily become a bureaucratic political apparatus.

Serge also emphasized that the Chinese comrades pay attention to the specificities of China's social structure, and shouldn't mechanically apply the Russian model of revolution (as was the case in Germany in 1923).¹³⁷ The proletariat was a tiny minority in China. It would need the support of its natural allies, the peasants, but the revolutionary vanguard must liberate itself from the petty-bourgeois intellectual prejudices and liberalism of Sun Yat Sen. It must also free itself from idealist doctrines, from nationalism, and must break with the past; an intellectual liberation would be necessary to have a clear communist conscience.¹³⁸

Serge also counseled that it would be impossible to go forward without a rigorous balance sheet of past errors and successes. The horrible errors of the Soviet Party and the Comintern were never subjected to self-examination. The

¹³⁶ Serge, La Revolution China 1926-1928, pp. 141-145.

¹³⁷ In fact, Serge pointed out that the Kuomintang adopted the rigid, monolithic internal structure of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, and was supported in this move by the Comintern. The Kuomintang became the Chinese section of the Comintern and remained so even after the massacre of 1927. The opportunistic adoption of the centralized, non-democratic internal regime was directed against the Chinese communists. Serge, La Revolution China, pp. 125-127. (Clarite no. 13, 15 Sept. 1927.)

¹³⁸ Ibid, p. 147.

Kuomintang remained the Chinese section of the Comintern even after the massacres.

If the tone of Serge's articles seemed too didactic, it expressed the utter frustration of the Opposition in the face of the beheading of the Chinese revolution for the sake of inner party victory in the Soviet Union. Serge's articles were meant to persuade and convince, to reach out and explain to the international communist community that there was an alternative political point of view. Although his tone was urgent, Serge's analysis was clear, rooted in empirical fact, and not in the least dogmatic. The style of argument which he adopted was similar to all Serge's political-historical works: it was not polemical demagoguery, but careful attention to detail, the scrupulous compilation of important statistics, leading to clear theoretical conclusions.

Serge's Chinese articles are also remarkable for his perspicacity. Twenty two years before Mao Tse-Tung led the victorious Chinese revolution to success (in 1949) Serge recognized the clear-sightedness of an "unknown young communist militant" called Mao Tse Tung. Referring to two works of Mao¹³⁹, Serge wrote that he had read many works on China, but did not encounter the clarity of Mao anywhere else. Serge said that Mao's formulations reminded him of Lenin in 1917-1918. He then quoted Mao's conclusions:

"The leadership of the revolutionary movement must belong to the poor. Without the poor there is no revolution. Distrust of the poor is distrust of the revolution; attack them and you attack the revolution. Their revolutionary measures have been an infallible justice." ...

"If the completion of the democratic revolution is represented by the number ten, the part of the cities and the army must be represented by three and that of

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Mao Tse-Tung, "Analysis of Classes in Chinese Society" (March 1926) and "Internal Information on an Investigation of the Peasant Movement of Hunan," (March 1927).

the peasants that have made the revolution in the countryside a seven."¹⁴⁰

To this Serge added his own comment: "if the leaders of the revolution had been inspired by such a clear conception, all victory would have been possible."¹⁴¹

What Serge saw in Mao was an uncompromising commitment to the poor, which seemed refreshing in the morass of class collaboration and kow-towing to nationalist generals. Yet if one looks at Mao's statement more carefully, it is anything but clear, except in its commitment to the mass of Chinese peasants. In terms of class analysis, however, Mao's concept of the 'poor' is vague in the extreme. There is no discussion, at least in Serge's quote, of the role of the proletariat. It seems to me that Mao's quote is more similar to the Lenin in 1905 of "Two Tactics of Social Democracy in the Democratic Revolution"¹⁴² rather than the Lenin of 1917. Nor does the quote reveal that Mao was clear on the character of the Chinese revolution, using the term 'democratic' rather than 'social' to describe the revolution. The whole point of Serge's Chinese study, in fact, was that the actions of workers and peasants in China leading up

¹⁴⁰ Mao Tse-Tung, op cit, quoted in Serge, "La Lutte des classes dans la Revolution chinoise," Clarte, num. 12, 15 aout 1927, p. 358. Translation is mine.

¹⁴¹ ibid.

¹⁴² Although one could argue with Lenin on his conclusions in this particular work, he was never unclear on concepts. Even in this work, Lenin was clear that the proletariat would need to take the lead, allied with the peasant, in completing the bourgeois-democratic revolution as a prelude to the consummation of the socialist revolution. The revolution would lead to the 'revolutionary-democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry', but once the revolution was accomplished the peasant would no longer be revolutionary, and the proletariat would once again have to take the lead, first in splitting the peasantry between the rich peasants and the poor, landless, semi-proletarian peasants, in order to carry forward the socialist revolution. See "Two Tactics of Social Democracy" pp. 94-96. [check page number in collected works]

to 1927 demonstrated the ripeness of social revolution, and amounted to a clarion call for the proletariat to take the lead with the peasants behind them, to make the revolution. Serge's study was an application of Trotsky's theory of 'permanent revolution.' The policies of the Soviet Communist Party and the Comintern had been criminal in that they aimed at inhibiting the socialist character of the Chinese revolution, subordinating it to the interests of the bourgeois democratic nationalists.

Where Serge and Mao coincided was where both recognized the particularities of Chinese social structure in promoting an indigenous revolution, as opposed to a 'model' the Russian party in the Comintern sought to artificially impose. The tragedy of the Chinese revolution was that in the world communist movement it took a back seat to the internal struggle in the Russian Party.

3.13 The Left Opposition and the Chinese revolution

The articles Serge wrote for Clarte first exposed him to repression. Serge surprised even himself with the accuracy with which his study on China had predicted defeat. The Left Opposition had effectively propagandized on the regime's disastrous policies in China throughout 1926-27. Serge had said that "China galvanized us all."¹⁴³ China's ascendant revolution in 1927 represented for the Opposition the next vital struggle for the international extension of the revolution, an affirmation of Lenin's theses on the national and colonial question.

The Opposition's arguments on China proved embarrassing for the regime, which desperately sought a victory to use as a

¹⁴³ Memoirs p. 216.

showpiece at the 15th Party Congress. Chinese masses had advanced from victory to victory in 1927; Hong Kong was blockaded by Canton, a revolutionary republic had been proclaimed in the south of China, and Soviet advisors were sent in.¹⁴⁴ This coincided with the defeat of the Opposition in the USSR and the consummation of Stalin and the bureaucracy in power. Serge explained the thrust of Chinese policy as one defined by a new social stratum, driven by a different ideology,¹⁴⁵ -- which had driven the workers from power in the USSR, leaving only the name of the proletariat in its dictatorship.¹⁴⁶ Serge dared to suggest that the new functionaries in power feared the victory in China more than they pretended to desire it.¹⁴⁷ Stalin's policy (executed by Comintern delegates in China) commanding entry into the Kuomintang by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) "first paralyses it, then compromises and strangles it."¹⁴⁸ The Opposition's admonitions were ignored. In fact, they were not allowed to speak. The Comintern enjoined the Chinese revolutionists from forming soviets, arming themselves, or encouraging peasant revolts. The Chinese workers and peasants were led from one

¹⁴⁴ Victor Serge, From Lenin to Stalin, p. 45.

¹⁴⁵ V. Serge, Russia Twenty Year After, p. 256.

¹⁴⁶ Serge, From Lenin To Stalin, p. 45.

¹⁴⁷ Trotsky would later say this assessment was too radical. See discussion on pp. infra.

¹⁴⁸ Serge, RTYA, p. 256.

ambush to another. Stalin's 'bloc of four classes' policy,¹⁴⁹ wrote Serge, was a travesty of Lenin's revolutionary policy.

With the debacle in Shanghai, protest mounted in the Soviet Union. Serge, filled with despair, took his five minutes time to speak out in his branch meeting. He shouted "The prestige of the General secretary is infinitely more precious to him than the blood of the Chinese proletariat!" Serge wrote that a "paroxysm or hatred" swelled up, and the hysterical audience was on the point of lynching the Oppositionists.¹⁵⁰

Stalin needing a victory to counterbalance the bloody defeats, sent his cousin Lominadze along with Heinz Neumann to foment an uprising in Canton, to coincide with the opening of the 15th Party Congress in December 1927. After forcing the Chinese Communists against their will into the bourgeois Kuomintang, forbidding the creation of Soviets, holding the agrarian revolution in check and preventing the Chinese Communists from arming the workers without the permission of the bourgeoisie, Stalin switched course. Now he urged the Chinese Communists to immediately bid for power by staging an insurrection. C.L.R. James, in a discussion on the History of

¹⁴⁹ Stalin, inspired by Bukharin, claimed this policy would encourage a socialist evolution in China by means of penetration into the Kuomintang. Instead it sealed their (the revolutionaries) fate. Their blood flowed freely, largely due to Stalin's consideration of China's insignificant national bourgeoisie, his fight with the Opposition, and his disastrous leadership of the Comintern. See Souvarine, op cit, pp. 440-443, Deutsch, Vol. 2, pp. 323-327, Serge From Lenin to Stalin, pp. 45-49, RTYA, pp. 255-237.

¹⁵⁰ Memoirs, p. 217.

the Left Opposition with Leon Trotsky in April 1939, quoted Victor Serge on Stalin's zig-zag, saying the Commune was necessary "if only for a quarter of an hour" for the sake of the Sixth World Congress of the Comintern.¹⁵¹ Souvarine wrote in his biography of Stalin that Stalin needed "a victory bulletin as an argument against the 'pessimism of the Opposition.' The result is a revolutionary rearguard action, isolated, artificial and doomed to failure."¹⁵²

Canton blazed in glory just long enough for the Soviet press to print rapturous proclamations of triumph. Their shortlived victory bathed Stalin in adulation through the first two days of the Congress. The next day the Cantonese Commune was drowned in its own blood.¹⁵³ While Chinese revolutionaries bled and died, the Congress pronounced the expulsion of the Opposition, which the Comintern untiringly approved. Serge said this was the first time the bureaucratic regime

"stubbornly sabotaged a prodigious revolutionary movement because its own (national) interests, contrary to those of the proletariat, forced it to.....(the Comintern approved everything) ... without having to overcome the slightest nausea when it stood

¹⁵¹ Writings of Leon Trotsky [1938-1939], Pathfinder Press, Inc, New York, 1969, pp. 261-264.

¹⁵² Boris Souvarine, op cit. p. 471.

¹⁵³ Serge noted that the fate of the 'subalterns' Lominadze and Neumann were not treated kindly for their services in China. Lominadze became an Oppositionist after the Chinese events and committed suicide in Sverdlovsk in 1935 on the eve of his arrest; Neumann disappeared in the purges of 1937, having taken refuge in the USSR from the Nazis. His wife was turned over to the Gestapo after the Nazi-Soviet Pact. From Lenin to Stalin, p. 49, and Memoirs p. 173.

before the deepest pools of blood, the most enormous or the most pettifogging knavery."¹⁵⁴

Trotsky's discussion with C.L.R. James mentioned above shows a different nuance on this issue. The thrust of the argument of Serge and Souvarine (and James) is that the bureaucracy, acting in its own interests, sabotaged the Chinese revolution. Trotsky wrote in My Life that the "epigones' leadership in China trampled on all the traditions of Bolshevism"¹⁵⁵ but that they were anxious for the success of the revolution. Trotsky affirmed that Voroshilov, Chicherin and others, all Stalinists, sat on a committee with Trotsky and considered Trotsky's attitude too pessimistic. Yet the crux of the difference as Trotsky enunciated it to James in 1939, was that Stalin and company genuinely wanted to push a dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry¹⁵⁶ onto what they believed was a bourgeois democratic revolution in China. In other words, Serge's position, shared by James, led to the conclusion that the bureaucracy could not support a proletarian revolution because it was a bureaucracy, whereas Trotsky, while agreeing that bureaucrats acquired "bureaucratic habits in thinking" and thus "proposed to restrain the peasants..so as not to frighten the generals"¹⁵⁷, nevertheless saw Stalin's position as one of not understanding the dynamic of either the Russian or the Chinese revolution. He said that Stalin and Bukharin were overwhelmed by events in China just as they were in Russia in 1917 until Lenin came. Trotsky continued:

¹⁵⁴ Serge, Russia Twenty Years After, pp. 159-160.

¹⁵⁵ Leon Trotsky, My Life, p. 552.

¹⁵⁶ This formulation is not accidental; the clear conception of the hegemony of the proletariat, put forward by Serge and the Opposition, is muddled in Stalin's 'twin dictatorship.'

¹⁵⁷ Trotsky, Writings 1938-9, p. 262.

"In different writings of theirs you will see passages that show that they never understood. A different form of existence, their bureaucratic habits affected their thinking and they reverted to their previous position. They even enshrined it in the program of the Comintern: proletarian revolution for Germany, dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry for semicolonial countries, etc."¹⁵⁸

The difference Trotsky wished to stress in 1939 was that the degeneration of the revolution was still in process in 1927, not yet completed. Stalin acted not out of contrary class interests, but out of a crude understanding of Marxism, which at crucial junctures, as in March 1917, caused him to miss the boat in the face of real revolutionary events. Likewise Trotsky believed Bukharin was equally confused as a Marxist (a point Serge often suggested as well), and this was clearly apparent in his wide swings -- from dialectician to realist, from left communist, to right oppositionist.¹⁵⁹

As for the effect the Chinese defeat would have on the inner party struggle, Trotsky recalled scores of Oppositionists visiting him in the offices of the Chief Concessions Committee in the wake of the Chinese bloodbath. He wrote that the younger comrades were certain that the bankruptcy of Stalin's policy was bound to bring victory to the Opposition. Trotsky wrote:

...I was obliged to pour many a bucket of cold water over the hot heads of my young friends -- and over some not so young. I tried to show them that the opposition could not rise on the defeat of the Chinese revolution. The fact that our forecast had proved correct might attract one thousand, five thousand, or even ten thousand new supporters to us. But for the millions the significant thing was not our forecast, but the fact of the crushing of the Chinese

¹⁵⁸ Trotsky, *ibid*, p. 263.

¹⁵⁹ This is not to say that people can't develop and change, or that they don't at various times write 'absurd things' (Trotsky's quote) but that in the case of Stalin and Bukharin, the consistency was in misunderstanding the nature of the Russian revolution, and thus the complexity of Marxist thought and method.

proletariat. After the defeat of the German revolution in 1923, after the break-down of the English general strike in 1925, [sic] the new disaster in China would only intensify the disappointment of the masses in the international revolution. And it was this same disappointment that served as the chief psychological source for Stalin's policy of national-reformism."¹⁶⁰

3.14 The Opposition vanquished

Serge explained that the defeat of the Opposition, (and hence the working class) by the 'parvenus' could only be understood from the international angle, by the twin defeats of the revolution in Europe and Asia -- Germany in 1923, China in 1927. Souvarine, on the other hand, attributed the defeat of the Opposition to its own mistakes¹⁶¹. Serge admitting that the Opposition had 'committed a number of secondary mistakes,' considered Souvarine's insight too detached to accurately evaluate events. In particular, Serge wrote it was unjust to compare Trotsky's attitude to the Party with Robespierre's deference for the Convention of Thermidor. Souvarine had written "In both cases, the actual power of empirical politicians triumphed, by a cynical combination of force and astuteness, over doctrinaires poorly equipped with a practical sense."¹⁶² Although Serge would later agree that party patriotism clouded the sense of the Opposition, in 1936 he answered Souvarine:

"Isn't it plain that the practical sense of revolutionists is basically different from that of the empirical politicians who represent other social formations? The practical sense of Liebknecht has little in common with that of Noske. The practical sense of revolutionists who deem it necessary to fling themselves under the chariot wheels because it is in the higher interests of the proletariat, is just as different from that of the parvenus to whom the

¹⁶⁰ Leon Trotsky, My Life, p. 553.

¹⁶¹ Souvarine, op. cit., p. 472.

¹⁶² Souvarine, ibid., p. 474.

morrows of the great defeats of the working class offer invaluable opportunities for better installing themselves in power. Souvarine ought to know this, after all, for he, too, was a 'doctrinary' vanquished by the 'empiricists' because of his devotion to the International of the great years."¹⁶³

The problem with this is that by throwing themselves 'under the wheels of the chariot ..in the higher interests of the proletariat' the Opposition did not help the immediate interests or lives of the proletariat or the revolutionaries who perished in great numbers in the years to follow.

3.15 Arrest

Preobrazhensky met with Serge and warned him to stop publication of his article on Canton or risk years in jail.¹⁶⁴ Serge was convinced he would be deported anyway and went ahead, although as a precaution he let a Parisian comrade put his signature to Serge's article devoted to the Canton Commune.¹⁶⁵

Preobrazhensky was right, and Serge was soon called up before the Party's Control Commission. He was expelled from the Party, ostensibly for calling the decision of the 15th Congress to expel the Opposition a 'grave error.' The astonished Control Commission of the Leningrad Central District, headed by the tired old worker Karol, expelled Serge forthwith: the Party Congress wasn't capable of error!¹⁶⁶

Serge was arrested three months later. In the interim, the killings began. The first of the Oppositionists to be killed was Albert Heinrichsen, a worker the Putilov factory in the Leningrad suburb of Narva, and the former commissar of a Red battalion at the front. When the GPU came to arrest him he flew

¹⁶³ Serge, Russia Twenty Years After, p. 162n.

¹⁶⁴ Memoirs, p. 239.

¹⁶⁵ Serge, RTYA, 160n.

¹⁶⁶ Memoirs, pp. 239-240.

into a rage and said "Ah, you have come to the point of locking up the Leninists! And you aren't ashamed of yourselves! Thermidorians!" He was taken by force and the next day his wife was informed he had committed suicide. She insisted on seeing his body and when she finally found it, the bruises and mutilation made it clear that he had been savagely beaten. Serge and others pressed for an official investigation, to no avail. This was in Dec. 1927, or Jan. 1928. Serge's comrade and good friend Vassily Chadayev followed in August 1928, assassinated on the highway near Kuban with the complicity of the authorities. Chadayev had written on the agrarian problem, advocating efforts toward collectivization. After six months in prison, he was sent on assignment to Kuban by Krassnaya Gazeta. His dispatches exposed racketeering and corruption. His reward for his honesty was a hail of dum-dum bullets.¹⁶⁷ At about the same time Trotsky's secretary George Valentinovich Butov died after carrying on a hunger strike for 50 days. Serge noted that when the Lord Mayor of Cork died from hunger strike the civilized world was shocked. Butov's fate remained unknown.¹⁶⁸

Serge's arrest came three months after the 15th Party Congress. Two agents came to his door at midnight and made a beeline for Serge's translations of Lenin. Serge ironically commented on the seizure of Lenin's writings, to which the soldier replied: "don't joke, we are Leninists too, you know." Serge commented: Perfect: we were all Leninists together. After an all night search, Serge was taken to jail. Serge commented in the Memoirs that his 7 yr old son Vlady wept not in fear, but anger. Vlady recalled the event as his first

¹⁶⁷ Memoirs, pp. 242-243.

¹⁶⁸ The stories of the fate of these Oppositionists is found in Serge's Russia, Twenty Years After, pp. 94-114.

"Trotskyist act": Vlady rescued a portrait of Trotsky from under the heels of the GPU agents ransacking the apartment.¹⁶⁹

Serge's first Soviet arrest was to last 7-8 weeks. He was held in the old House of Arrest. His warder had 'taken Trotsky out for his walks after the 1905 Revolution...'¹⁷⁰ Serge was held without charge in a tiny cell meant for solitary but cramped with three others. Serge wrote the prison was packed with victims targeted by the 'hated functionaries who were obsessives, maniacs, and torturers by profession." Serge passed the time rereading Dostoevsky. Serge determined that he would not take part in any 'recantation', and he was soon released with the proviso he not take part in 'anti-Soviet activity.'

Serge owed his release to the efforts of his Parisian friends who had caused enough commotion to embarrass 'high circles.' Clarte, now published under the title Lutte de Classes published an editorial protesting his arrest, the persecution of Oppositionists, and attacking the bureaucratic regime. The editorial outlined Serge's political past, the many articles he had contributed to a wide variety of French journals, and his years of service to the revolution now bent on persecuting the Opposition for its opinions.¹⁷¹

Not all French communist intellectuals mobilized on his behalf, however. Once he was released Serge's erstwhile comrade Vaillant-Couturier reported in L'Humanite that Serge had been treated well, and Barbusse let him know that during his imprisonment Barbusse had removed Serge's name from the masthead of Monde.

Although Serge admired some of Barbusse's prose, he found him a slippery character. After meeting Barbusse in the Hotel

¹⁶⁹ Taped interview with Vlady, Mexico City, May 1987.

¹⁷⁰ Memoirs, p. 240.

¹⁷¹ See "Victor Serge en prison," Clarte, Vol. 1928, No. 4, pp. 89-90. The editorial is quoted in full in Richard Greeman, op cit, pp. 400-401.

Metropole at the Tenth Anniversary celebrations, just prior to Serge's arrest, Serge commented:

Right from the first I saw him as a quite different kind of person; concerned above all not to be involved, not to see anything....all with the aim of making himself the accomplice of the winning side! Since it was not yet known whether the struggle had been definitively settled, he had just dedicated a book, at great length, to Trotsky,....When I told him about the persecution, he pretended to have a headache or not to hear,....My jaws shuddered as I realized that I was face to face with hypocrisy itself."¹⁷²

Nonetheless, Serge felt compelled to answer Barbusse's opportunistic action. He carried on a correspondence with Barbusse, which was later published in 1937 in Les Humbles as "trois lettres de Victor Serge a Henri Barbusse." The letters recount Serge's experience of arrest, interrogation and release, and defend his Oppositional views. Barbusse's letters suggested that the campaigns for Serge's release had harmed the Soviet Union and that Serge was somehow responsible. Serge diligently answered Barbusse's barbs, blaming the regime for its treatment of the Opposition.

The treatment that Barbusse and other French 'comrades' had meted out to Serge -- out of cowardice, complicity and slippery opportunism, contrasted sharply with the lonely and courageous struggle of the vanquished Opposition. The dark period was just beginning, and the men with whom Serge had shared struggles for the last decade were one by one disappearing secretly to the far corners of the USSR. The stage of struggle just commencing in would be especially bitter. While prison and exile were nothing new to these seasoned revolutionaries, those now persecuting them were their former comrades and the state which they had helped to create.

¹⁷² Serge, Memoirs, p. 238.

CHAPTER FOUR: STALINIZATION

I. 1928-1933: The Bureaucratic Counter-revolution, solitary struggles in precarious freedom

4.1 "Our Intellectual Activity is Prodigious, Our Political Action Nil."

If the years 1926-28 represented the "deadlock of the revolution" for Serge, the years 1928-1933 comprised his "years of resistance" followed by three years (1933-1936) of captivity. His personal experience in those years illuminates the struggle of the Opposition against the Party-State as well as the struggle of the individual against the 'relentless, overwhelming pressure of a totalitarian system."¹

1928 -- a watershed year in Soviet political development -- was a turning point in Serge's life. He was expelled from the Bolshevik Party, though he remained a Left Oppositionist, and was arrested that spring. The arrest was short and inconsequential in terms of his other periods of captivity, but clearly marked a new period in Serge's life. Open political activity was now denied him, ending a period of 10 years of furious activity within the Bolshevik Party and another 13 years of political activity in Europe² as an anarchist, syndicalist, and socialist.

Another significant event was to mark this point in Serge's life: he suffered an attack of intestinal occlusion just days after his release from prison. His physical condition had never been strong, probably due to a life of privation from childhood.³ Serge felt he had narrowly escaped death. 1928

¹Memoirs, p. 244.

²More than six of these years was spent in prison.

³His childhood was extremely poor; Serge described meals of stale bread dunked in coffee; his younger brother didn't
(continued...)

marked the year that he suffered a 'political death' as well as a nearly dying. In such moments, one is forced to consider the deeper meaning of one's life, and to evaluate one's life work and duty. Serge did exactly this and determined that he must give the rest of his life over to writing. He sketched out in his mind a series of documentary novels about these 'unforgettable times.'⁴

Serge's decision to become a serious writer was conscious, deliberate, and supported by those around him. The decision did not come out of the blue, but had antecedents. We have already discussed Serge's last meeting with Trotsky, in which they discussed Serge's literary intervention in the French left. Vlady, Serge's son, recalled Nikos Kazantzakis' words to Serge when he stayed with the family in Leningrad six months before Serge's arrest: he insisted that Serge was a writer, a novelist, first and foremost. Vlady felt Kazantzakis' words were well taken by Serge.⁵ Richard Greeman considered 1928 as a "crucial turning point in Serge's life"⁶, and Serge himself wrote of his decision, taken in a moment of 'rich and tranquil inner

³(...continued)

survive the spartan regime, dying of starvation at the age of 9. Memoirs, p. 5. Serge's 5 years in a French prison also contributed to his weakened physical condition, as did his years in Orenburg, later.

⁴Memoirs, p. 161

⁵In private conversation, May 17, 1987, Mexico City. Ironically, Kazantzakis returned from Russia feeling sorry he and Serge had not enjoyed a closer rapport. In the biography of Nikos Kazantzakis, Helen Kazantzakis (his wife) wrote that Kazantzakis thought Serge "a tried and tested revolutionary ... [who] had translated Trotsky ... had known Lenin intimately from the early days, and all of Lenin's comrades. You could have confidence in him." Nikos Kazantzakis, a Biography based on his letters, Helen Kazantzakis, Creative Arts Book co., Berkeley, 1983, pp. 222-223.

⁶Greeman, op. cit., p. 415.

lucidity' at death's door.⁷ The decision however, was guided principally by political considerations. Serge had a lot to tell.

Serge explained that when he entered the Russian revolution he gave up writing literature. Serge obviously believed the needs of the revolution precluded 'serious writing.' As editor of the French Inprecorr, and a frequent contributor to various French journals, Serge chronicled and analyzed the heady years of revolution, Civil War, and the German revolution. Yet he considered that this work contained "nothing of value" since "there was such a striking discrepancy between my sensibility and my opinions."⁸ Being a Party journalist was not serious writing in Serge's estimation.

Ten years later, Serge felt in tune with himself and thought that the reactionary phase now entered would be lengthy. He also reasoned the West would be stabilized and since he was "refused the right to join the work of industrialization, except at the price of my freedom of opinion, I could [while remaining uncompromising as an Oppositionist forced into inactivity] provide a serviceable testimony on these times."⁹

To Serge, writing was something to engage in when one was unable to fight actively to change the world. By his own admission, he had renounced writing when he entered the Russian revolution, only returning to it during periods when open political action was not feasible, as in the Vienna years. Political journalism, which was part of the political struggle itself, Serge continued throughout his life. Writing literature, however important and illuminating, took a back seat

⁷Memoirs, p. 263-4.

⁸Ibid. p. 262. Serge's articles in Inprecor during the German revolutionary process are a good example of this 'discrepancy'.

⁹Ibid.

to what Serge termed his 'duty' as 'dictated by history itself.'¹⁰ Unceremoniously prevented from further active service to the revolution he had served ten years, Serge would now bring the political maturity gained during his years of struggle to his writing. No longer bound by party discipline, Serge was freed from caution, Aesopian language and the 'striking discrepancy between my sensibility and my opinions.' He set to work on Year One, gathered material for Year Two, and finished Men in Prison, his first novel.

Serge traded activism for the pen, and wrote with a mission: to expose and analyze the significance of the rise of Stalinism and the Stalinists. Serge worked ceaselessly until he died, churning out novels, histories, pamphlets, polemics. In the years 1928-1936, while still in the Soviet Union, Serge wrote four novels, two short stories, one volume of poetry, six works of history, politics and literary theory; translated three novels, poems, and seven volumes of history, politics, theory and memoirs. Such a prodigious, almost incredible record is even more amazing, considering the difficult circumstances in which Serge labored.

Serge also resolved to write a certain way. He eschewed the personal and sentimental which characterized French novels; he would write about great historical events, in which the actions of the masses, not of a single character, would drive the plot.

Serge's historical and political works are partisan yet scholarly, coherent and analytical and based on first hand knowledge on both personal his experience and his immersion in source material. Yet he searched for a vehicle which would allow a larger "scope for showing men as they really live, dismantling their inner workings and penetrating deep into their souls."¹¹ He confessed that historical work did not satisfy him

¹⁰ Memoirs, p. 262.

¹¹ Ibid.

entirely and demanded time and access to resources he could not afford. Serge turned to literature, but not for its commercial value nor snob appeal: his conception of writing needed a "mightier justification":

"as a means of expressing to men what most of them live inwardly without being able to express, as a means of communion, a testimony to the vast flow of life through us, whose essential aspects we must try to fix for the benefit of those who will come after us."¹²

Other Serge studies have analyzed his literary expression. Richard Greeman has written various articles and the last section of his doctoral dissertation examines how Serge's political conceptions led him to adopt a revolutionary literary style suitable to his subject. William Marshall has written a thesis on the relationship between ideology and literary expression in the works of Victor Serge, and various others¹³ have analyzed Serge's literary output. Serge himself wrote, in his Memoirs and his Carnets, of his literary influences and motivations. What was crucial to Serge was what he had to tell, and he adopted an appropriate form to do so; that of revolutionary testimony. Here we are more concerned with the political / historical events and controversies in which Serge was both witness and participant, and with his perceptions of these subjects as expressed in his political allegiance and activity, and in his political, historical and journalistic writings. The emphasis here is on analyzing the 'other' Serge,

¹² Ibid.

¹³ For example, Roy Johnson, "Victor Serge as Revolutionary Novelist," in Literature and History A New Journal for the Humanities, Vol. 5:1 Spring 1979, pp. 58-85, John Berger, The Look of Things Essays by John Berger, New York, Viking Press, 1974, pp. 74-79, Alan Swingewood in The Novel and Revolution, The MacMillan Press Ltd, London, 1975, pp. 169-190, Irving Howe, "Serge's Novel," in The New Internationalist, January-February 1951, pp. 56-59.

the serious political writer /activist whose views shaped and reflected important historical events.

* * *

During the five years Serge spent in precarious liberty in Moscow and Leningrad, his literary writings in Western Europe paralleled his own life. The left in the West found his work too critical and thus boycotted it; bourgeois critics found it too revolutionary and withheld public comment. Within the Soviet Union, Serge was told, point-blank: "You can produce a masterpiece every year, but so long as you are not back in the line of the Party, not a line of yours will see the light!"¹⁴ To this day, not a single one of Serge's books have been printed in the Soviet Union.¹⁵

Serge was not singled out for boycott. The fate of Soviet writers and artists under Stalin was tragic. Those who managed to conform to Stalinist strictures published, but Serge agreed with Max Eastman, these were "writers in uniform." Censorship mutilated creative expression. Serge recalled seeing the first edition of the Encyclopedic Dictionary, the product of years of work, sent to be pulped. Serge himself translated Maria Shaginyan's novel Hydrocentral, a product of bureaucratic conformity.

The history of the annihilation of Soviet non-conformist writers in the years of the Great Terror -- well-known and lesser-known -- has yet to be written. Under the 'glasnost' of Gorbachev in today's Soviet Union, some writers are being resurrected, but no account of their collective fate has been published. Serge wrote an essay on "La Tragedie des ecrivains sovietiques (Conscience de l'ecrivain)" published in Paris in

¹⁴As told to Serge by Ilya Yonov, an old friend, former Zinovievite Oppositionist, now the head of the literary publishing house of the State Press. Memoirs, p. 262.

¹⁵Although Men In Prison was translated, proofread and made into pages. Ibid. In 1989, some of Serge's fiction finally began to appear in Soviet literary journals.

Jan. 1947 and reprinted in English in Now No. 7 (1947) in which he traced the fate of some writers, and discussed the contortions of the surviving conformist writers. In the article, Serge mentioned the fate of certain "master-writers" of Soviet Literature, such as Boris Pilniak, Isaac Babel, Voronski, Ivanov-Razumnik, and Osip Mandelstam. How the hundreds of lesser-known writers, authors of revolutionary memoirs vanished, is something known only to directors of the Secret Service of the Political Police. Serge added that perhaps they knew and only perhaps since "the police chiefs who made the purges have themselves disappeared. The rule is that once the man is suppressed, his works are eliminated, his name is no longer pronounced; it is erased from the past and even from history."¹⁶

Serge characterized the atmosphere for writers in this period as one of 'overpowering, sickening absurdity.' Writers were 'compelled to fanatical obedience' in their 'prestigious' meetings of the writers union. Serge recalled the confused reaction of the great Bavarian anarchist poet/playwright Ernst Toller, when "young men of letters, who were none the less practically unlettered, suggested the formation of 'mopping-up squads,' to go to the second-hand bookshops and remove from them historical works which the Leader had just attacked."¹⁷

Serge was entirely out of place among such 'literati' and his presence both compromised and reproached them. In order to make a living, Serge worked for the Lenin Institute, translating into French Lenin's collected works, although as an oppositionist, his name was kept out of the published volumes. His translations were "checked, line by line, by experts charged

¹⁶ "The Conscience of the Writer" reprinted from Now in David Craig's anthology Marxists on Literature, Penguin Books, Middlesex, England, 1973, p. 439. French edition, published as supplement to Masses Jan. 1947 in "Les Egaux" p. 7.

¹⁷ Memoirs, p. 272.

with the task of uncovering possible sabotage in the disposition of semicolons."¹⁸

4.2 The 'Inner Counterrevolution': From NEP to Nightmare

By 1927-28, the combination of lack of industrial policy and the growth of the private sector in agriculture led to a grain crisis.¹⁹ The low prices peasants were offered for their grain coupled with the high prices charged for scarce industrial goods was a powerful disincentive to produce more than the peasant needed for himself and his family. Then a series of poor harvests threatened both the state's export plans and food supplies. The peasants boycotted grain requisitions and Stalin responded by ordering extraordinary measures to collect the grain. Red Army soldiers began to take the grain from the peasants at gunpoint.

Serge wrote in Soviets 1929 that there were five real causes of the crisis: 1) the general poverty of the Russian peasants and the backward state of agriculture which used millions of ox carts and was unaware of the existence of chemical fertilizers; 2) the growth in population from 135 million in 1914 to 145 million in 1926, despite the war and famine; in times of peace growth would be 2-3 million per year; 3) the weakness of industry which meant scarcity of quality goods, and high prices for manufactured goods compared to low prices offered for the peasant's grain; 4) the effects of the bureaucratic regime in the countryside which in practice frustrated all the decrees and allowed the real kulaks to hide

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 173.

¹⁹ A useful discussion of the chain of events set in motion by the general crisis in NEP in 1927-28, leading to the wholesale and ruthless collectivization of the peasants in 1929-30 can be found in Moshe Lewin's book Russian Peasants and Soviet Power: A study of Collectivization, Northwestern University Press, 1968.

what they actually had; and 5) the conscious resistance of the rich peasants, sustained by the majority of cultivators because "all peasants are at ease ... who dream unconsciously of becoming a little capitalist."²⁰

The grain crisis, predicted by the Left Opposition broke out less than three months after the expulsion of the Opposition at the Fifteenth Party Congress. Pravda declared in February 1928 that the peasants refused to deliver their grain to the state because they weren't paid enough for it. Nor were there sufficient commodity equivalents to make it worth their while.²¹

Stalin's Central Committee responded with Article 107 of the Penal Code on concealment of stocks²². Requisitioning began as fields were stripped of their crops. Reminiscent of the Civil War period and War Communism, "Communists were found at the roadsides with their skulls split open. The stacks of confiscated grain were set on fire. There was no fodder at all....."²³

Serge used both the terms 'requisitioning' and 'confiscated grain' to discuss the *razverstka*, or method of (forced) procurement of grain. Moshe Lewin called the *razverstka* -- especially in the use of article 107 against the kulak in 1928, -- an 'emergency measure', "the allocation by administrative

²⁰Panait Istrati (ghosted by Serge), Soviets 1929, pp. 22-23.

²¹Serge, RTYA, p. 163.

²²Serge, Memoirs, p. 246.

²³Ibid. Lars Lih devoted an article in Slavic Review, Winter 1986, to a discussion of how the 'quota assessment' -- his preferred translation of *razverstka* -- was carried out during War Communism, and how the term has been misinterpreted by many historians as requisitioning or confiscation, the terms Serge employed.

order of quantities of produce to be delivered by households, irrespective of the views of the latter."²⁴

Stalin's brutal bureaucratic response to the grain crisis set a pattern of response to difficulty, leading his regime from one exploit to another, with increasing human and social costs. The issue of power remained paramount. Opposition was settled first by deportation, later by prison or death. Serge noted that Stalin was caught in a blind alley with no policy, but was "dominated by the instinct of preservation."²⁵

As Stalin was ridding himself of Party opposition, he suddenly faced massive peasant resistance -- more than 300 centers of peasant insurrection flaring up simultaneously in Soviet Eurasia²⁶ -- and thus declared war on the peasantry, designating them as kulaks, to be wiped out as a class.

Serge devoted a chapter to the grain crisis and the kulak in his Soviets 1929, as well as a chapter on collectivization and industrialization in his Destiny of a Revolution of 1936-37.²⁷ In the 1929 work, Serge explained the background to the crisis and restated the positions of the left, right and center of the Party in posing solutions. We will further analyze this work below.

²⁴Moshe Lewin, Russian Peasants and soviet Power, pp. 217-218, and p. 532.

²⁵RTYA, p. 163.

²⁶Serge, Memoirs, p. 257.

²⁷It should be noted here that Serge's ideas are spread throughout his works, but rarely contradict each other. Thus, an argument that is bluntly stated without elaboration in his Memoirs of 1941 is illustrated and explained in one of the other books, or in an article. Sometimes the same argument is repeated verbatim in several places. His consistency of position allows us to selectively quote from one or another of his works, since the four main texts of Serge are broadly similar and in places practically identical though written over the space of more than a decade.

To break the considerable resistance of the peasants, Stalin embarked on a war against the class enemy and began mass deportation of the so-called kulaks and their families to the icy north. In a brilliant little book, From Lenin to Stalin, Serge demonstrated the interrelation of cause and effect in the Soviet experience, showing how the consequences of a policy, or of no policy, cannot be evaded. Examining the consequences of Stalinism, in fact, led Serge to state unequivocally that it is

"a hundred times untrue that the end justifies the means. ... Every end requires its own means, and an end is only obtained by the appropriate means. ... More personal well-being, more liberty, fewer lies, more dignity, more respect for humanity. The socialism which proceeds otherwise gives in to a sort of inner counterrevolution, discredits itself and risks suicide."²⁸

Economic factors plus bad leadership led to the crisis of 1928 and to the terrible solutions which destroyed the soul of socialism. Stalin spent years defeating Trotsky while industry stagnated, while NEPmen and rich peasants grew comfortable. By 1928 the peasant lost his incentive to sell grain or even to sow, since his crops were likely to be stolen. The political struggle within the party had overshadowed everything for Stalin; power was paramount. Thus years were lost in starting industrialization. Because the Opposition was perceived as a threat to the rule of the center and the right, they ignored and rejected the substance of Opposition policy and the dangers that policy addressed.

As Serge noted in his 1936 study, Russia Twenty Years After, the return of requisitioning met with fierce resistance, especially since the requisitions were illegal and ran counter to the often repeated promises the Party had made to the peasants. Stalin's response to the resistance was to dispossess the peasant and force him on to the collective farm.

²⁸ FLTS p. 58.

Serge maintained that no one had foreseen or could have predicted wholesale, forced collectivization. The idea was madness, especially since the Collective farms weren't prepared. The very idea of collectivizing agriculture had been to make it advantageous both to the peasants and national agriculture. The plan, conceived since 1925-26, envisioned collectivizing only as much land as could be supplied with agricultural machinery. The whole purpose of collectivization was to industrialize agricultural production and provide an attractive alternative to the small farms of the peasantry. The Kolkhoz without tractors made no sense. Indeed, Serge referred to collective farm activity as "large-scale motoculture."²⁹ He added that 'this would have been the only, the genuine socialist policy and the peasants would have promptly convinced themselves of the benefits of the new mode of production over small-scale and primitive cultivation.'³⁰

Stalin's actions, as Serge pointed out, were no longer dictated by the interests of the 'community,' but by those of the emerging bureaucracy. Stalin declared war on the resisters, "designated as enemies of the people ... [to] be 'liquidated as a class'." Those now labeled kulaks, including many peasants, Serge pointed out, who had fought well for the soviets were suddenly driven from their homes

"packed together in cattle carts and sent in trainloads to the subarctic tundras, the forests of Siberia, the marshes of Naryn, the sandy wastes of Kazakhstan. All the deserts of the vast Russias are going to swarm with little white crosses. Several million peasants will undergo this fate. It will be the greatest transplantation of populations that

²⁹ Ibid., p.167.

³⁰ Ibid.

history has ever known and its concrete details are atrocious."³¹

Quoting the Russian scholar Prokopovich who used admittedly unreliable official statistics (at the time Prokopovich was making his study the statisticians were being imprisoned and shot) Serge estimated that when collectivization was completed in 1936, 5 million peasant families had disappeared.³² We need not go into the details here about how this forced policy was carried out, but in the last five years a wealth of literature has appeared in the West on the collectivization and the famine in the Ukraine, and the subject is now being examined seriously in the Soviet Union itself, as a result of 'glasnost.' While the bureaucratic policy had terrible consequences for millions, Serge sought to demonstrate how people had resisted. He recounted the story a comrade had told him about the resistance of women in a Kuban Cossack village:

They had undressed, thinking that nobody would dare to take them, nude, from their dwellings and lead them to the train by force. The young communists, the party and G.P.U. men, surrounded the village in which all the men had previously been arrested, dragged from their homes the dishevelled women and their kids, crazed with fear and rage, and brutally drove this naked floc to the station....The children the old folk, and the feeble succumbed en masse. The newspapers, however, overflowed with copy on the collectivist enthusiasm of the agrarians. In Monde I

³¹RTYA p. 168. Serge suggested elsewhere that 5 million peasant families suffered this fate, a figure confirmed by Moshe Lewin in his study on Soviet Peasants. Lewin affirmed that 5 million households and 10 million peasants were affected, although this figure indicates that peasant households only contained 2 people. Moshe Lewin, Russian Peasants and Soviet Power, pp. 507-508. Recent scholarship on collectivization both in the West (Robert Conquest's study on the artificially created famine) and within the Soviet Union, now suggests even greater numbers. In a Soviet study reported in 1988, Soviet sources now say 10 million peasant families affected. Pravda, 1988.

³²Memoirs, p. 247.

read the shocking prose of Barbusse on the miracle of the collectivization."³³

The resulting devastation on agriculture is by now well known. Peasants slaughtered their livestock and burnt their grain. The country went from poverty to famine. There was no bread for workers in the cities nor for soldiers in the army. Bread-cards were issued, wages dropped, the black market grew and industry was affected. Total collectivization promised utter disaster and even Stalin had to call a halt when it had reached 68%, in March 1930, at the height of terror, famine and frenzy. His famous article, "Dizzy with Success"³⁴ called a temporary retreat.³⁵ As entire populations were deported, Serge noted that peasants rushed toward the borders of China, Poland, and Rumania, risking machine-gun fire to cross. "In a message

³³ RTYA, pp. 168-169. As a footnote to this barbarous episode, the Central Committee member in charge of beating naked women with rifle-butts as they were driven to be loaded in cattle-cars, -- comrade Sheboldayev -- was shot in 1937 for his enthusiasm. Memoirs, p. 247.

³⁴ Stalin, "Golovokruzhenie ot uspekhov. K voprosam kolkhoznogo dvizheniia," Sochineniia 12: 191-199. The article "Dizzy with Success" appeared in Pravda, March 2, 1930.

³⁵ The whole question of collectivization, industrialization and terror is being opened in the Soviet Union today. The new information resulting from this research will be vital to enhancing our understanding of these processes. In an article that recently appeared in the Soviet Nedelya, April 11-17, 1988, by Russian Republic Honored Scientist Igor Vasilyevich Bestuzhev-Lada (Doctor of History, head of a sector of the USSR Academy of Sciences' Institute of Sociological Research, and Professor at Moscow State University) states that "It is clear that the article "Dizzy with Success" (March 2, 1930) was simply a tactical manœuver." He questions, therefore, why the policy was continued once its disastrous, 'catastrophic' nature had become clear. Later in the same article, Dr. Bestuzhev-Lada wonders whether Stalin's shooting of Yagoda and Yezhov wasn't again 'diversionary maneuvers' in the spirit of the article "Dizzy with Success," suggesting that both were attempts to 'adjust the process' rather than any real retreat. See Nedelya, April 11-17, 1988, pp. 10-11.

to the Government, the Abkhazes of the Southern Caucasus offer it all their possessions; with oriental politeness, they thank the government for all the benefits it has heaped upon them and ask only one favor: permission to emigrate to Turkey."³⁶

With the publication of Stalin's reproach to forced collectivization in March 1930, permission had effectively been given to leave the kolkhoz. The peasants left en masse: between March and June 1930 half of the newly 'collectivized' peasants abandoned the collective farms. Had the collectivization drive not been halted there would have been no spring planting. Once the crops were harvested in the autumn, the collectivization campaign was renewed with vigor, although the artel (allowing a private plot, cow and chickens) was now made the basic unit. Scarcity resulting from the peasant's dislocation turned to famine by 1932. The problem of reduced harvests resulting from peasant resistance was exacerbated by the State confiscation of grain for the cities, the army and export.

Such were the results of Stalin's attempt to destroy an enemy class. Trotsky had noted that an entire class could not be eliminated by administrative methods, but "only by a change in technology and the mode of production.... It was no more possible to create large-scale mechanized agriculture out of wooden ploughs and kulak horses than it was to create a ship by adding up fishing boats."³⁷ Trotsky's perceptions of the

³⁶Serge, FLTS p. 64.

³⁷Leon Trotsky, Byulleten' Oppozitsii, IX (1930), p. 3. Quoted in Richard Day's excellent article "Leon Trotsky on the Problems of the Smychka and Forced Collectivization" in Critique 13, 1981, pp. 55-68. In an interesting variation of Trotsky's quote, Anton Ciliga, cites Trotsky as having said: "By putting together the poor hoes and the poor nags of the mujiks one no more creates large agricultural estates than one creates a large steamer by putting together a lot of fishing boats." Anton Ciliga, The Russian Enigma, London, The Labour Book Service, 1940, p. 270. (First published in Paris in 1938 as Au Pays du Grand Mensonge.) Finally, Serge quotes Trotsky (continued...)

problems the Soviet state had with the peasantry came from an understanding of Marxism. He wrote that the transcendence of the contradiction between industry and agriculture would require the industrialization of agriculture. Serge concurred. Stalin and Bukharin, on the other hand, in the period before wholesale collectivization and following the logic of 'socialism in one country,' sought to overcome the urban-rural contradiction through the mechanism of trade and finance between the sectors. Trotsky emphasized that the material transformation of the basis of rural production was the key to the urban-rural contradiction.

Serge bemoaned the absence of socialist spirit and the disregard of the Marxist classics, especially Engels' ideas on the socialist attitude to small peasant property. Serge recalled Lenin's recommendations: make an ally of the middle peasant, fight the rich peasant who is becoming a small capitalist, but do not coerce the peasant masses.³⁸ Lenin's policy towards the peasants during the Civil War, despite mistakes and abuse, led to victory; Stalin's crude parody in 1930-31 led to disaster.

Understanding the interrelation of industry and agriculture was fundamental to the formulation of policy. Stalin's dictatorial reactive agricultural policy led to distortions in industry. Total collectivization, unforeseen and unplanned, created a need for giant factories to produce agricultural

³⁷(...continued)

in FLTS: ... "From his exile in Constantinople, Trotsky never ceased to protest severely against what he considered a 'fatal economic adventure.' No more than you can build a transatlantic liner by assembling hundreds or thousands of fishing smacks -- he wrote with bitter irony -- can you create modern, large-scale agriculture by forcing small farmers to pool together their ploughs, their oxen, and their chickens.... True socialist collectivization must be brought to the farmer by showing him the unquestionable advantage of its mechanization and planning." FTLS, p. 66.

³⁸RTYA, p. 169.

machinery. This used up resources intended for other sectors. As Serge observed, collectivization produced a shortage of raw materials, hostility, a ruined agriculture, and destroyed the plan for industry. As hostile peasants hoarded grain and destroyed their livestock, agricultural output dwindled;³⁹ Stalin demanded higher quotas and extracted every last grain in the Ukraine for the cities and export. This state-organized famine killed 7 million peasants in 1932-33.⁴⁰ To Serge's credit he wrote about this atrocity when it was widely denied in the West.⁴¹ Serge noted wryly that collectivization produced anarchy rather than a plan, quoting Souvarine's expression, 'the anarchy of the plan.' Serge wrote: "Instead of applying a political pattern, Stalin is reduced to improvisations."⁴²

The period of forcible collectivization is being reevaluated by scholars both in the West and in the USSR. Serge's writings on the beginning of the creation of the

³⁹Trotsky had predicted that all-round collectivization would destroy incentives and lead to "all-round weeds in the fields." Byulletin' Oppozitsii, XXXI (1932), p. 6, quoted in Day, Ibid, p. 67.

⁴⁰Serge, RTYA, p. 170. See also Bohdan Krawchenko, "The Famine in the Ukraine in 1933," Critique 17, 1986, pp. 137-147, and Robert Conquest, Harvest of Sorrow, Oxford University Press, 1986.

⁴¹On the fiftieth anniversary of the famine in 1983, the whole story of the suppression of the facts by prominent Western journalists such as Walter Duranty of the New York Times and Louis Fischer of the New Republic came out. Few correspondents reported the truth about the famine, although it was thought that Duranty had sold out or the Soviets had something on him. One of the exceptions was the reporting by Malcolm Muggeridge of the Manchester Guardian who wrote a series of articles describing the horrors of the famine in Ukraine and the North Caucasus. Andrew Smith, in his Memoir, I Was a Soviet Worker, wrote of a boat trip on the Volga which passed through the starving hamlets of the countryside, described in grisly detail. The Western coverage of the famine is discussed in Conquest, op. cit., pp.308-321.

⁴² Serge, RTYA, p. 163.

Stalinist system are that of a revolutionary documentarian, analyst, witness and participant. He analyzed Stalin's political directives and their effects on ordinary Soviet citizens. In Serge's analysis, collectivization and forced industrial development were part of the attack arsenal of the emerging Stalinist elite on the whole of Soviet society. In analyzing these events, Serge stood on the left of the Left Opposition, although easy characterizations are elusive and inadequate. As we shall see below, Serge's writings on industrialization are extremely penetrating, right from the beginning. As early as 1929 Serge pointed out that the Soviets were creating useless factories, wasting tremendous human and social resources. His analysis is contradictory -- not just because reality itself was contradictory, but because of internal contradictions in the Left Opposition's analysis which they couldn't have seen at the time. In the space of a few pages Serge would question the nature of industrial growth, and then follow with a statement about how a planned economy was responsible for the accomplishment of industrialization. This contradiction, which fits within the constraints of Trotsky's political position, will be discussed in the last chapter dealing with Serge's last writings on the Soviet Union.

4.3 The Vocation of Defeated Revolutionists: Serge, the Clandestine Oppositionist in Precarious Liberty

At the beginning of 1928 Serge remained alone with Alexandra Bronstein, Trotsky's first wife, in the Leningrad branch of the Opposition. There had already been many arrests, thanks in large measure to effective GPU infiltration.⁴³ Serge

⁴³One of the agents, Tverskoy cleaned up the Moscow Opposition, including the old Bolshevik Boris Mikhailovich Eltsin, who was to appear in many of Serge's novels as 'Elkin.' After Tverskoy successfully led the Oppositional sympathizers in Moscow factories into arrest, he offered his services to the Leningrad Opposition -- ostensibly to help
(continued...)

believed that the only way to survive would be to work openly, intransigently, in a loyal opposition to the Party which was strangling itself. Trotsky was in exile in Alma-Ata, writing that the system was still proletarian, to be defended, as was the Party. Serge's thoughts were filled with bitter irony; in the Memoirs he noted that nobody was willing to admit that the bureaucratic state "had emerged from our own hands to crush us" and that the idea, held throughout the Party and the Opposition that the only way to serve the Revolution was through the Party, consigned the Opposition to "rebel and turn us against ourselves." ... "We were defeated by Party patriotism."⁴⁴ Serge wrote these lines in 1941, and it is not possible to know if he was projecting his thoughts from 1941 backward to 1928, but if it is true that he advocated an open, loyal opposition to the Bolshevik Party in 1928, (albeit without an organization) Serge was indeed a maverick; other oppositionists wavered between capitulation and clandestinity, with a view to being reintegrated into the Party.

The Stalinist counter-revolution made the question academic. Open political agitation was simply not possible. Serge wrote that the leaders of the defeated Opposition (presumably Zinoviev, Preobrazhensky, Trotsky et al) discussed setting up a strong clandestine organization which would later "achieve rehabilitation in the Party...with freedom of speech and propaganda"⁴⁵ Serge opposed the idea, calling it an illusion in the face of a powerful and ubiquitous secret police

⁴³(...continued)
 them 'reorganize'. Alexandra Bronstein and Serge refused his 'help' but he nevertheless organized "fifty or so workers, only to have it [the shadow organization] rally noisily to the 'general line' within two months, while those who resisted were thrown into jail. This police manoeuvre was repeated in all the working-class centres." Memoirs, p. 245.

⁴⁴Ibid.p. 245.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 244.

dedicated to seeking out and crushing opposition, and secondly because "our own ideological and sentimental loyalty to the Party made us vulnerable both to political manoeuvrings, and even more, to police provocation." Serge again reiterated that open activity was preferable to being bundled into illegality, that the Opposition must defend its right to exist, write, think, speak openly. The hopelessness of the clandestine project also contained an irony: the vanquished opposition had not fought for freedom of expression and propaganda within the society at large. Were they now demanding something for themselves which they had denied their previous opponents? Preobrazhensky and Trotsky had much to say about inner-party democracy in the 1920's: it was not until the second half of the thirties that Trotsky wrote of political pluralism and a multi-party system in the USSR. Serge consistently defended broad democratic rights both inside and outside the Party, and had even suggested in 1923-4 that a coalition government was preferable to the bureaucratic rule on its way to becoming the 'dictatorship of the secretariat and secret police.'

During the next two years Stalin turned on the Right Opposition, initiated dekulakization and collectivization and began his program of crash industrialization. The Opposition was scattered to the far reaches of the Soviet Union.⁴⁶ The Oppositionists' confusion in the face of what appeared to be Stalin's adoption of some of the tenets of their own program -- albeit a crude caricature of their positions -- made unity among them difficult. Serge admitted that "the vocation of defeated revolutionists in a totalitarian state is a hard one. Many abandon you when they see the game is lost. Others, whose

⁴⁶In fact, by 1929 only three well known Oppositionists in the entire U.S.S.R. remained in liberty, albeit precarious: Andres Nin in Moscow and Alexandra Bronstein and Victor Serge in Leningrad. They were under surveillance, as were the wives of Oppositionist deportees. See Victor Serge and Natalia Sedova Trotsky, The Life and Death of Leon Trotsky, Wildwood House Ltd, London, 1975, p. 161.

personal courage and devotion are above question, think it best to maneuver to adapt themselves to the circumstances."⁴⁷

Serge recognized that Stalin had taken elements of the Opposition programme, emptied of their democratic content, and ruthlessly implemented them. The Opposition had proposed a tax on the rich kulak -- Stalin had him eliminated. The Opposition had proposed a limiting NEP -- Stalin had it abolished. The Opposition had favored industrialization -- Stalin initiated it late, on a grand scale, at enormous human and social cost. The banner of the Opposition's program had been working class democracy -- one Opposition fundamental that Stalin made no attempt to appropriate.

Still, some Oppositionists rallied to Stalin and the 'general line' because elements of the Opposition program were applied. Perhaps capitulation was preferable to political immobility. The Party was still the 'only game in town' and for life-long revolutionaries to be cut off from political activity was to live without meaning. In this manner Piatakov, Krestinsky, Sokolnikov, Antonov-Ovseenko, Ivan Smirnov, and Smilga all capitulated.⁴⁸ Zinoviev and Kamenev made

⁴⁷Serge, FLTS, p. 53.

⁴⁸Isaac Deutscher, in the second volume of his Trotsky biography, suggests that Stalin lured these Oppositionists to his side with his 'left turn' as he needed their assistance to defeat the Bukharinists and take on the kulaks, but he feared that a reconciliation with Trotsky would mean Trotsky's triumph. His secret appeals to the confused Oppositionists centered on the futility of their Opposition now that he was implementing elements of their program. Indeed, Trotsky had called for 'critical support' for Stalin against Bukharin, the kulak and the NEPmen. The persecuted and exiled Oppositionists, whose morale was at a low point, saw the reasons for their Opposition disappear as their 'cause' was partly taken up by their persecutor. Their battle became purposeless according to Deutscher, who attempted to unravel their thought processes. See Deutscher, The Prophet Unarmed, Trotsky: 1921-1929, pp.407-411. The recantations and capitulations did not affect all Oppositionists: Serge
(continued...)

capitulation a way of life. They gave many reasons but basically they boiled down to a) the mistaken impression that the Opposition program was being implemented; b) the rationalization that the USSR was in danger, or c) it was preferable to capitulate and take part in building rather than to be consigned to inactivity defending ideological purity. Trotsky, in a letter to Rakovsky in July 1928, wrote that the capitulationists imagined that "the Stalinist faction, having moved leftwards, had only a 'rightist tail' behind it and should be persuaded to rid itself of it." Doubting the truth of this, Trotsky remarked, "an ape freed of its tail is not yet a human being."⁴⁹ Anton Ciliga saw the capitulators as:

"intellectuals [who] cared very little about the fate of the working class. That was not the factor that decided their political attitude, it was the speeded-up industrialization and the offensive against the kulaks. Their attitude towards the horrible oppression and exploitation under which the workers suffered was exactly the same as that of the Stalinists and Bukharinists."⁵⁰

In fact Ciliga admitted that many of them saw Stalin as necessary, saw Russia as Asiatic and backward in need of a dictatorship to save the revolution, and who dismissed Ciliga's protestations as "Western illusions."⁵¹

⁴⁸(...continued)

belonged to the group of 'irreconcilables' who were in general younger, less tied to the old Party and attracted to the revolution by the principles of proletarian democracy which were paramount. The left course of Stalin, devoid of any democratic content, had no appeal to this group.

⁴⁹Trotsky to Rakovsky, July 13, 1928. Quoted in Deutscher, Volume 2, p. 447n.

⁵⁰Ciliga, The Russian Enigma, pp. 84-85.

⁵¹Ibid. A Soviet diplomat had told Ciliga that "the way of Genghis Khan and Stalin" suited Asiatic Russia better than "the European civilization of Leon Davidovitch." (p. 85) The
(continued...)

Serge was both more profound and more kind. Though he was not cut from the same cloth as the old Bolsheviks who debased themselves by capitulating, he did not see them as opportunists. In Serge's view,

These old Bolsheviks have no private life outside of their political activity; they attach little importance to what the bourgeoisie calls position, or even to happiness. Are they cowards? Ahead of them are nearly ten years of the most intolerable life, leading up to the most frightful end. Their attitude combines a great courage, an absolute devotion without phrases or gestures -- a courage which does not hesitate to cloak itself as pusillanimity, a devotion which does not shrink before the worst humiliations -- with a very real intellectual and moral deficiency. Too much attached to the party, they fear to see reality as it is. The party is finished. They shrink back before this final realization. They do not sense that in debasing themselves, they debase the Revolution; that it is better to remain erect and proud in error than to give an example of such abasement even for the best of causes. They aim to maneuver, in the belief that the main thing is to remain within the party until the day when spontaneously the decisive struggles break out which will make party reform possible.⁵²

Even comrades who understood the dynamic of capitulation later succumbed to it. This phenomenon has been particularly difficult for students, scholars and activists outside the Soviet Union, to understand. We will return to this point when we discuss the purges and confessions, about which Serge wrote extensively.

⁵¹(...continued)

Genghis Khan reference comes from Bukharin, who compared Stalin to Genghis Khan -- neither of whom had any scruples. Another Oppositionist said: "A workers' democracy is out of the question in Russia. Here the working class is so feeble and demoralized that to give it liberty would be to ruin the revolution once and for all. What may save it is an educated minority dictatorship" *ibid.*

⁵² Serge, *FLTS*, pp. 53-54.

4.4 "Soviets 1929"

In Leningrad (1927) Serge had met Panait Istrati⁵³, the Rumanian novelist, and Nicos Kazantzakis, the Greek writer, while they were touring the Soviet Union. Serge was their political guide, and they made his flat their home base in the USSR.⁵⁴ After Serge was released from his first Soviet arrest he and Istrati went to stay in a little dacha in the depths of the Bykovo woods⁵⁵, where their friendship and collaboration grew. They spent three months in picturesque solitude in the fresh air, with plenty of time for discussion and reflection.⁵⁶

Istrati had worked politically with Christian Rakovsky and was in the Soviet Union at Rakovsky's invitation. Istrati and Serge had visited a model prison colony in which the prisoners - hardened criminals -- worked in freedom under their own supervision. Istrati commented ironically that in the Soviet Union one had to murder at least three people to live in comfort and under such a wonderful work system.⁵⁷ Serge recalled that Istrati keenly observed and commented on many such ironies and injustices.

⁵³ Istrati, a man who came to writing after many varied experiences, was what Serge considered a true poet, "incapable of theoretical reasoning, and so could not fall into the trap of convenient sophistry." Serge heard people tell Panait: "Panait, one can't make an omelette without breaking eggs. Our revolution, ..." etc. He exclaimed, "All right, I can see the broken eggs. Where's this omelette of yours?" The phrase became famous as a description of the course of the Soviet Union. See Memoirs, p. 278.

⁵⁴ Vlady recalled that Kazantzakis lived with them for six months in 1927-28. Taped interview, Mexico City, May 1987.

⁵⁵ Bykovo is about 40 kilometers from Moscow.

⁵⁶ Panait Istrati, Vers l'autre flamme: Apres seize mois dans L'U.R.S.S 1927-1928, Union Generale d'Editions, 1980, pp.113-114. Also in Serge, Memoirs, p. 277.

⁵⁷ Memoirs, p. 279.

Istrati subsequently returned to France,⁵⁸ heartbroken by his experiences in the Soviet Union and resolved to write about them. Still free in Leningrad, Serge wrote the second volume of Istrati's trilogy on the Soviet Union, Vers L'Autre Flamme. In fact, Istrati wrote only the first volume, Serge wrote the second, and Boris Souvarine the third. As Victor Alba explains:

After long discussions with Souvarine, Istrati signed his own name to a second volume titled Soviets 1929 and actually written by Victor Serge, then in Leningrad at liberty but still subject to harassment. Finally La Russie Nue (Russian Naked), a book of factual documentation, appeared signed by Istrati but written by Souvarine. Istrati signed the books with his name to aid their publicity: "I want the voices of my friends to be heard as widely as possible, to at least provoke the debate now prohibited in the USSR, and to try to save the Communist International."⁵⁹

In the introduction to the 1980 edition of Panait Istrati's Vers L'autre Flamme, Marcel Mermoz recounts how Serge, in Leningrad, managed to smuggle out the second volume of Istrati's trilogy. Istrati's companion Bilili got past the police with the manuscript hidden in her blouse. Mermoz confirms that Souvarine indeed wrote the well documented third volume of the trilogy.⁶⁰

⁵⁸He had been in the Soviet Union twice: the first tour lasted three months until Dec. 1927; then he and Kazantzakis went to Athens, and after two months returned to tour the Soviet Union for a year. They went to Bykovo in the beginning of May 1928. Istrati left the USSR for France on 15 February 1929. See Mermoz, p. 11, and Istrati, pp 199-202.

⁵⁹"Boris Souvarine: Logic and Indignation," Journal of Contemporary Studies Vol. VIII, Number 4, Fall/Winter 1985, though appearing in Spring 1986.

⁶⁰Marcel Mermoz, Introduction, Vers l'autre Flamme, Fondation Panait Istrati, 10/18, Union Generale d'Editions, Paris, 1980, pp.23-24. Richard Greeman, in his article "Victor Serge: Writer and Witness," New Politics, Vol. 1, No. 2 (New Series) Winter 1987, p. 214, confirms the story of Bilili carrying the manuscript in her bodice and cites Monique Jutrin-Klener, Panait Istrati, Paris, 1970, p. 9.

The book is unquestionably penned by Serge, in his familiar style. While not of the calibre of his Year One of the Russian Revolution or of Destiny of a Revolution, Soviets 1929 resembles more his Portrait de Staline, directed to a mass audience. Written as the impressions and analysis of a political visitor from the West (Istrati from Rumania), the book clearly means to engage the reader's sympathy for the politics of Trotsky's Left Opposition.⁶¹ Analyzing the Soviet situation in 1929, the year Stalin proclaimed "the Year of Great Change"⁶², Serge's book renders the program of the Left Opposition, detailing the crisis in industry, agriculture, within the party, within the society, affecting the intellectual and moral life of the Soviet people and ending with the tragic situation of Soviet writers. The book follows the debates, from the twenties, between the right, centre and left, and presents them in clear, simple prose. It also lays out the kind of society created by Stalin's 'socialism in one country'; the rise of the bureaucracy, the mores and attitudes of the various sectors of society, their actual working and living conditions.

The work is polemical, taking the side of the Left Opposition while educating the reader on the positions of the other currents. Following the point of view of the Left

⁶¹ Clearly serge was never fooled/attracted, as other erstwhile Oppositionists were, to Stalin's apparent adoption of some of the Oppositions' programme in 1928-9 during the grain crisis and subsequent collectivization and industrialization. Serge wrote in 1929 that Stalin's policies were "une application caricaturale vouee a l'echec. Remarquez qu'il ne pose serieusement, ni la question ouvriere, ni celle du regime interieur du parti." Soviets 1929, p. 35.

⁶² Anton Antonov-Ovseyenko, The Time of Stalin: Portrait of a Tyranny, Harper Colophon Books, 1981, p. 56. This memoir was first published as Stalinshchina: Portret tirana, Khronika Press, 1980.

Opposition, Serge said that "nous sommes, au pays des ouvriers et des paysans, des reformistes et non des revolutionnaires".⁶³ This position was shared by Trotsky, and the reasoning was based on the collective ownership of property whose control had been usurped by the parasitic bureaucracy. In this case, they argued, what was necessary was not a revolution, but a reform of the society, uprooting the bureaucracy.⁶⁴

The last chapter is a call to action for the proletariat of the West and the Soviet Union: "Tout est entre vos mains."⁶⁵ In it Serge declares that the future health or disease of the proletarian dictatorship depends entirely on the vigor with which the revolutionary proletariat fights against the 'fossilization of Marxism' and uses Marxist method as a guide to creative action that inspires the world working class. "Camarades ... Vous etes encore les maitres de votre destin."⁶⁶

⁶³Translation: "We are, in the country of workers and peasants, reformists, not revolutionaries." Istrati, Soviets 1929, p. 139.

⁶⁴It must be remembered that Serge was writing in 1929, as events unfolded. The Left Opposition argued that the nationalized means of production provided the base for socialized production, but that a new privileged stratum, thirsty for power and determined to rule, had strangled the proletarian state. Rakovsky, in his "Letter to Valentinov" had described the Soviet state as "a bureaucratic state with working-class remains" and was deeply anxious about working class apathy. Trotsky stuck closer to Lenin's formulation of a 'workers' state with bureaucratic distortions' and thought the indifference of the masses was temporary. The Opposition's program of "Soviet reform" and a return to revolutionary methods could be accomplished, they thought, by a secret ballot first in the Party, then in the trade unions, and finally in the Soviets, ensuring that the leadership of all three was elected by a truly democratic poll. Victor Serge and Natalia Sedova Trotsky, The Life and Death of Leon Trotsky, pp. 167-169.

⁶⁵ Istrati, Ibid. p. 203.

⁶⁶ Soviets 29, p. 209.

Serge outlined the ideas and 'spirit' of a program of reform for the Soviet Union, to include:

- 1) A call for the return of internal democracy in the Party;
- 2) A call for a profound reform of the press to make it more critical, less dependent on local authorities, guaranteeing the right of response (without reprisal) and the right of expression of the nuances of Soviet and communist opinion, all of which would aid in the return of democratic centralism in the Party;
- 3) The scientific, literary and theoretical domains must be free of official doctrines that impede serious intellectual inquiry;
- 4) The judicial system must defend the workers and peasants' state, and not be a tool of the counter-revolution. The accused must have the right of defense and security. The cheka must account for its acts in front of the regular justice of the workers state.
- 5) In production, there should be a stimulation of the individual interests of the workers and a maximum of workers democracy.⁶⁷

In calling for attention to individual worker's interests, Serge did not mean to pit one against the other; rather, he wanted to see the interests of the workers as human beings addressed. A return to democracy was called for within the Party, not society at large, in order to demonstrate the Opposition's loyalty to the Party. The Stalinist faction had accused the Opposition of trying to form a second Party, which it steadfastly refused to do. The Opposition wanted to challenge the power of the bureaucrats from within. It was a loyal opposition to reform the party-state, since Trotsky thought a second party would rally the "malcontents and ... become an unconscious tool of reaction."⁶⁸ The position of the

⁶⁷Istrati, Ibid. p. 205-7.

⁶⁸Serge and Natalia Sedova Trotsky, op cit., p. 167.

Left Opposition, defeated in the Soviet Union, evolved with events, so that by 1938 Trotsky and his followers founded a new international revolutionary organization, standing on the grave of the CPSU(B) and the Comintern.

Serge's remarkably astute insights are illustrated in the chapter "Le Gaspillage Bureaucratique Dans L'Industrie." In many ways Serge's method of exposition here is typical. He does not begin with abstraction, but rather with the piling on of concrete detail and example in order to demonstrate that the human and financial resources for the development of industry existed in the Soviet Union, but these precious resources would be squandered if the problem of the bureaucracy wasn't solved.⁶⁹ Serge wrote this work in 1929; it is instructive to see that the wasteful nature of Soviet production, about which so much was written in the thirties and after, made itself evident right from the beginning, in the execution of the first five year plan. It was obvious to anyone living in the Soviet Union at the time, and is mentioned in nearly all the memoirs of the period. Few, however, attempted to explain the cause of the enormous waste.

Serge's method was to amass empirical detail, interspersed with pregnant observations, to suggest the consequences of the coercive nature of Stalinist society. In order to develop his point, Serge painted the whole picture; industry, agriculture, the political superstructure, the various political currents, the society at large with its social mores, and the rising bureaucracy. Serge's examination of agriculture, industry, social, intellectual and political life leaves the reader with the simple conclusion that the bureaucratic system had compromised the future of the U.S.S.R.⁷⁰ This book is meant to be taken as the impressions of a foreign traveler to the Soviet

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 47, 59.

⁷⁰ Soviets 1929, p. 55.

Union, yet its multi-layered presentation is rich in theoretical implications for even the informed scholar.

Serge's political analysis suggests itself in the organization of his material. In this particular chapter, Serge catalogued examples of waste: he discussed the construction in metallurgy that proceeded entirely without plans, squandering immense resources and years of effort to build an unusable factory. This particular factory, in Kertch in the Crimea, began at a cost of 20 million roubles and four years later had cost at least 66 million, "sans plans ni devis"; the problem at the end was how to get fuel to Kertch from Donetsk. The responsibility, according to Serge, lay with the bureau of Glavmetal and the trust Yugostal. This particular example of waste was reported in the Pravda of 8 Sept. 1928, but Serge insists it was entirely typical.⁷¹ Lack of coordination meant factories were produced but could not function because there were no power stations to feed them. In other areas power stations were constructed where there were no factories to use the energy. Stalinist planning, or anti-planning, led to waste, high production costs, and useless construction.⁷²

The point Serge made is that the examples he chose represented not the exception, but the rule. While waste mounted, in a number of instances, "les fonctionnaires des entreprises de l'Etat socialiste etaient en rapports d'affaires avec les nepmans qu'il leur etait facile d'enrichir."⁷³ While precious resources were squandered (often to the benefit of the functionaries and NEPmen), Serge presented the reader with the

⁷¹See Istrati, Ibid. pps. 47-49.

⁷²This theme will be taken up in Chapter 6 *supra* in the discussion of Serge's later writings on his perceptions of the Soviet version of a 'planned economy.'

⁷³Translation: "The bureaucrats of the socialist state had a business understanding with the nepmen who found it easy to enrich themselves." Soviets 1929, p. 51.

important contrasts: the construction of beautiful public palaces for postal and telegraphic services and the famous Moscow subway -- which with all its glorious marble splendor, failed to provide even a single bench for a tired working woman waiting to go home to her 'other job'.⁷⁴ These 'monuments' of the 'workers state' presented an attractive facade, but masked the immense waste of resources consumed in their production. Serge asked if it would not have been better to spend some money to improve workers' lodgings which were a terrible disgrace? Serge demonstrated not only that workers needs were not taken into consideration, but that the parvenus, who owed their plum positions in the bureaucracy to their political loyalty, not technical expertise, were responsible for the staggering waste of precious resources.

Serge used another example to illustrate the way in which the bureaucratic system 'passed the buck' using endless paperwork so that no one took the blame for waste. Encouraged by the long list of signatures, it became easy to add one more to rubberstamp even the most outrageous adventure. Privately, these bureaucrats would acknowledge the horrible wastage, but publicly they adopted the rule "pas d'histoires."⁷⁵ The particular scandal Serge used as an example involved the importation and manufacture of 'tracteurs automobiles:'

On a importe des tracteurs de l'etranger, on en fabrique en Russie meme. L'agriculture en a le plus grand besoin. Mais on a neglige de fabriquer des pieces de rechange, si bien que des milliers de tracteurs se trouvent hors d'usage une bonne partie de l'annee, faute d'une piece souvent peu importante par elle-meme. Le scandale est publie le 29 janvier dernier par la Pravda: 'Pendant deux ans et demi -- ecrit ce journal -- les reclamations, les demandes,

⁷⁴As Serge ironically commented in the Memoirs: "We know how to build subterranean palaces but we forget that a working-class woman coming home from work would love to be able to sit down beneath all these rich-hued stones." p. 321.

⁷⁵Ibid., p.56.

les avis autorises, les proces-verbaux de conferences ont grossi le dossier, sans que l'on fit rien d'effectif pour augmenter la fabrication des pieces necessaires aux tracteurs.' Les usines Poutilov en fabriquent, mais ne satisfont que 15% de la demande..."⁷⁶

Serge has taken us inside the bureaucratic machine to try to comprehend its workings. As for the individual worker, what happens, Serge asked, when an energetic individual with innovative talent comes along? How does he fit into this system? According to Serge, his potential contributions will never surface because what gets rewarded is not critical initiative, but conformity to the Party and the bureaucracy. Adaptation to what is good spirit and zeal for the Party are all that count. The leaders of industry never had to prove themselves. They did not rise through the ranks of work by demonstrating their ability in their respective industries; on the contrary, their aptitude had been shown only in their capacity for political spirit. After 1923 anyone who disagreed with what was going on was relieved of his post, and usually arrested later.

What is remarkable about this work is not that it presents anything new, not available elsewhere,⁷⁷ but that Serge's keen

⁷⁶Translation: "Tractors were imported from abroad and even produced in Russia. Agriculture had the greatest shortage, but replacement parts were not produced, so that thousands of tractors could be out of service a good part of the year due to the lack of a little part hardly important in itself. This scandal was made public by Pravda on last January 29th: 'For two and 1/2 years,' wrote the journal, 'claims, demands, official inquiries and conference reports have swollen the dossier without anything effective being done to increase the output of necessary parts for tractor repair. The Putilov works produces replacement parts but can satisfy only 15% of the demand.'" Istrati, ibid. p. 54-5.

⁷⁷In fact, later memoirs and studies are more precise and factual; for example, Antonov-Ovseenko's 1980 Memoir. Reading this latter account, however, is like a filling in of the basic outline Serge provided in 1929. (This is not to say that the two authors held similar political stances; Antonov-Ovseenko is an anti-Stalinist who is also hostile to Trotsky.)

powers of perception and description provide the reader with so vivid a picture of how the bureaucratic system worked on a grand scale. It is also unusual in the detail and number of examples of waste at such an early stage of the five year plan. Serge was not by himself in attacking this subject at that time. Rakovsky was grappling with the same theoretical questions⁷⁸. So was Trotsky. The value of Serge's work in this book and later in his From Lenin to Stalin and Destiny of a Revolution, is the unique and skillful way in which he employs by examples to indicate how economic events in this period occurred -- in a reactive fashion and according to any carefully developed plans. From this we can identify Serge's sympathy with Trotsky and Rakovsky, whose work he complemented and popularized, and with certain exiled leftwing Mensheviks writing in Sotsialisticheskyy vestnik. Conditions of repression and clandestinity in the late 1920s and early 1930s meant that fruitful collaboration was impossible, yet working independently and apart from one another, these separate observers formed a current of thought emerged that criticized the nature of economic growth and the chaotic state of planning, or more accurately, the lack of socialist planning.⁷⁹ They called it *besplannovost* (planlessness), and Serge's work in 1929 and later in the 40s clearly showed his identification and sympathy with this current.

4.5 "Build, build, build, export, shoot, build:" Serge's view of the First Five Year Plan

As has already been noted above, while the political superstructure was held in a chokehold, Stalin unleashed his

⁷⁸See Rakovsky, Critique 13.

⁷⁹This theoretical current is discussed in Donald Filtzer's afterword to Rakovsky's article, "The Five Year Plan in Crisis," published for the first time in English in Critique 13, (1981) pp. 13-54. Rakovsky's article "Na s'ezde i v strane" was originally published in Byulleten' oppozitsii 25/26 (1931), pp. 9-32.

forced collectivization and the five-year plan in industry. His policies created a system, flowing from the logic of socialism in one country, which was opposed at every turn by the Left Opposition. Stalin's system was characterized by a nationalist foreign policy, a 'plan' administered from the center, vast corruption, an elaborate hierarchy of privilege, and atomization of the overworked and undernourished work force. The system was rigidly controlled from the center and maintained by brute force and terror. This was possible because the economy was at a low level of technique, being mainly agricultural with a small industrial output.

In production, Stalin's political decisions were all important; when in 1929 he called for a higher rate of growth he was responding to the desperate need for capital goods and exports. He did not base his commands on actual economic resources or the needs of the population. Stalin exhorted the working class to work harder and harder, but exhibited no consideration of how realistic these goals were or what their cost would be in human terms. Outwardly (we are not privy to the closed discussion and debate) Stalin appeared to have no policy, shifting from 'right' to 'left.' Stalin incorporated hierarchical trends manifested earlier in the period of War Communism, and then under NEP into Soviet society after 1929. The result, was what the Soviets now call an 'administrative command system' and Ticktin calls an "administered nationalized economy with an hierarchical structure."⁸⁰ Its consequences are still in evidence today. Trotsky and Rakovsky predicted the results; Serge described the conditions.

Serge's descriptions of this system, in his historical/political works and in his fiction give us a sense of a rigidly regulated society and economic system that was also, paradoxically, out of control. Commands issued from the top

⁸⁰Hillel H. Ticktin, "The Contradictions of Soviet Society and Professor Bettelheim," Critique 6, pp. 17-44.

were often impossible to fulfill, but could not be questioned, so the impossible was attempted, resulting in an outcome often quite different from what was planned. Serge presented a picture of unrelenting gloom, with inhuman production line speeds and working conditions, and severe penalties for a careless word, or perceived sabotage (which could mean anything). In short, conditions were "dismally, onerously primitive."⁸¹ While it is clear that Serge's descriptions/analyses remain undeveloped, they contain a hard kernel of truth which informed his thinking. More often than not, Serge's views were apparent in his questions. After carefully analyzing working conditions and comparing them to conditions in the West and also to the privileged position enjoyed by technocrats, Serge wrote:

"The management of the enterprises is in the hands of communists who merely carry out the instructions of the central organisms. Do these instructions prove to be inexecutable? Do they have unforeseen and vexatious consequences? Do low wages adversely affect the productivity of labour? Has the plan been discredited? Finally has the engineer permitted himself to formulate objections? Did he keep still, out of prudent complacency, on the eve of an experiment that turned out badly? In all these cases and in many others, the technical personnel, accused of incompetence, of negligence, of bad faith, even of the counter-revolutionary spirit or of conspiracy, is the object of mass punishments which always mean arrests and all too often end in executions...."⁸²

Industrialization was carried out at the expense of the worker and peasant who lived on the brink of starvation and exhaustion. Serge wrote that when workers were asked (in 1936) if they lived better before the revolution, those aged 40 and over answered unanimously in the affirmative. Mothers complained, Serge added, that no matter how poor they were before the revolution, even the poorest enjoyed occasional good times during old religious festivals when children could taste

⁸¹RTYA, p. 13.

⁸²Serge referred to conditions in 1936. Ibid., p. 14.

creams, preserves, and pastries, things no one could now obtain.⁸³ Andrew Smith made a similar point in his I Was a Soviet Worker.

There isn't a political economy as such in Serge, but his facts speak boldly, and as he has assembled them, embody a logic, making them, in a sense, notes toward a theory. They are a treasure of data, impressions and analyses for students of the period. In his manner of exposition, it is clear that Serge, while describing the way the Soviet Union developed, presented history as a dynamic process which is dramatized with conflict and contradiction.

Serge's writing about the economy and society transformed empirical data into a moving, compelling chronicle. "Industrialization is directed like a march through conquered territory."⁸⁴ During the first Five Year Plan, production was beset with bottlenecks which included constant breakdown of machinery because it wasn't used properly. There wasn't time, quotas had to be met as Stalin demanded the 5 year plan be fulfilled in 4 or even 3 years. Precious resources, needed elsewhere, had to be used increasingly to repair machinery exhausted by improper usage. Spare parts were in short supply and often got lost in delivery. Stalin's answer to every problem was to squeeze the workers more; make them work harder, consume less; hold up their pay, cut their wages.⁸⁵

Although Stalin's political decisions were all important the kind of command he exerted did not result from any clear or consistent plans. Each economic move was a response to what had happened previously. Events followed their own demands and needs, beyond the reach of the center. The First Five Year Plan

⁸³ Ibid., p. 8.

⁸⁴ Russia Twenty Years After, p. 166.

⁸⁵ See RTYA, Part II, chapter 3, "Industrialization and Collectivization (1928-1934)", pp. 163-177, and chapter 4, "The Great Wretchedness (1931-1934)", pp. 174-185.

replaced the Marxist notion of planning -- conscious regulation of the economy by and in the interests of the associated producers -- with political exhortation and coercion to drive the economy forward. Balance and proportion gave way to a race to fulfill and overfulfill targets regardless of the dislocations or hardships.

One of the conditions produced by Stalin's policies was spontaneous labor turnover. Serge, quoting official statistics, pointed out such turnover was so widespread that in the Ukraine, whole factories were turned over in 3 months as workers moved on looking for food, housing and better working conditions.⁸⁶ But mainly Serge noted, "you travel because wherever you are you feel bad." To portray this human event, Serge added wryly that forecasts of transportation economists were exceeded, as more workers were on the move than during the California gold rush. Workers returned to the countryside because of famine at the same time as Stalin was introducing all manner of schemes to increase productivity.

Shock work brigades (udarnichestvo) and Stakhanovism were some of Stalin's schemes to speed up production. Serge pointed out they were doomed because they were basically a fraud, rigged by opportunist managers and workers in collusion to win bonuses for themselves.⁸⁷ Selected workers, working in special conditions, produced very high quotas which were then established as norms. The 'ordinary' workers, working in normal conditions, couldn't possibly match this output, but in the process of trying, did manage to produce defective goods, exhaust expensive machinery, and wear themselves down working in perpetually intolerable conditions without proper nutrition or

⁸⁶ Ibid., p.172.

⁸⁷ Ibid., Chapter 2.

decent attention to basic human needs.⁸⁸ The workers were treated as badly, or worse than the machines. Production, at any cost, was more important than anything else. The cost was high indeed.

Stalin introduced draconian labor laws, along with schemes to raise productivity, to impose control over a workforce on the move. Internal passports and severe penalties for violating work rules aimed to tie the worker to the factory, reducing the high turnover, while attempting to gain control over the individual worker.

4.6 RESISTANCE

Workers resistance to Stalin's draconian labor policy was both individual and collective. Workers reacted sharply, Serge wrote, to Stakhanovism and the creation of a "numerically small, well-paid labour aristocracy."

"Stakhanovists had their heads smashed. Some were killed. The young communist who, in order to get a bonus or to quit the plant later on tried to beat the record was considered a traitor by his shopmates. This resistance was broken by means of repression, and Stakhanovism was attenuated by generalizing it. The name was speedily worn down, in a few months, amidst abuse and even ridicule. The party committees were forced to react against the exaggerations of Stakhanovism."⁸⁹

Serge conveyed the regime's contradictory response to resistance, showing graphically what happened to those who dared to protest collectively. Workers struck, and the youth were

⁸⁸Andrew Smith, a black-listed American Communist worker who left depression-ridden USA in 1929 to join the 'workers paradise' in the Soviet Union, wrote a remarkable memoir, I Was a Soviet Worker upon his return in 1936. It is replete with examples demonstrating how the forced tempos and conditions of production wasted both human and material resources in the Soviet Union, as well as producing defective products.

⁸⁹RTYA, p. 18.

often the most militant.⁹⁰ Serge described a strike at the textile plant in Ivanovo-Voznessensk in April 1931, where the workers had but one slogan to express their demands: "We are hungry!" The authorities yielded, blaming the local leadership. Food was sent in; work was resumed. Then the purge began quietly.⁹¹ The Trotskyists (among the strikers) were shot and not a word was spoken, except abroad.⁹² In this one episode, Serge expressed the basic contradiction of the regime which manifestly feared the proletariat. Any protest action by however small a group was construed as a threat.

Strikes showed that the regime faced organized resistance from youth and a section of older workers who had somehow survived the Civil War, NEP, and famines. Stalin fought the workers and the peasants, while within the party the dry guillotine never let up. Serge reflected that Stalin must have at some point understood the magnitude of his crimes, feeling "the chill of death pass over his face."

The regime also had to cope with the results of its policy, all the while preparing for war. The result? Absenteeism, alcoholism, high turnover, general disruption of labor discipline which made it impossible to fulfill planned targets. The collectivization had created a situation of extreme

⁹⁰Serge was careful to point out that the youth in general were

"evolving towards a succinct realism. Smitten with technique, thirsting for well-being. supple in adaptation, hardened against pain and hunger. The word 'Americanism' still best expresses its spirit. Few general ideas, no formulated ethics, no conscious idealism, an aversion to politics."

(RTYA, p. 34.) The militant youth were the non-conformists, and according to Serge, 'set the tone' in the struggles, camps and prisons.

⁹¹This became the standard pattern of response to workers resistance, still seen today.

⁹²Destiny of a Revolution, p. 15-16. Sotsialisticheskii Vestnik places this strike in April-May 1932, not 1931.

scarcity. Serge made the point simply and forcefully: an underfed and malnourished workforce, living a joyless existence, could not be depended on to work well. What capitalist society had learned about slavery, was a lesson lost on the Stalinists.⁹³

4.7 Stalin's system

Much of the revolutionary working class was killed fighting Civil War, famine and foreign intervention, leaving a raw mass of politically unschooled peasants. Exploitation of workers and peasants was accomplished by force and opposition was eliminated with terror. Serge summed up Stalin's policy: "build, build, build, export, shoot, build. This is what is called the epopee of the great plan."⁹⁴ The best of what the workers produced was used for export, while they labored under cruel conditions, threatened with arrest, labor camp and death, if they resisted or even failed to push themselves to the extremes of their capacities.

Meanwhile, as peasants became workers, the Party absorbed the most opportunist, careerist elements, the 'parvenus' we meet in Serge's novels. His portraits of this parasitic, opportunistic caste, crudely adopting the worst traits of privilege and acquisitiveness border on the cruelly absurd. Serge's descriptions of the habits and attire of the cadres and functionaries, and of the former bourgeois women who flocked to their side, conjures up the sleaze and slime of an underworld suddenly in power. Rakovsky's discussion of the decomposition

⁹³In fact Serge was reminded of the pages of Capital where Marx described the "relentless mechanism of primitive capitalist accumulation." The present accumulation, Serge noted, was just as cruel, and "anti-socialist in its methods and in the treatment inflicted upon man." Russia 20 Years After, p. 177.

⁹⁴Ibid p. 178.

of the French Jacobin party, drunk with power, uncannily fits Serge's description of the Soviet parvenus.⁹⁵

Stalin's system, then, could be recognized by these features: bureaucratic totalitarian rule through the mechanism of terror; forced collectivization of agriculture and rapid industrialization of the economy with goals decided by fiat; chaos and rampant misery; and the rise of a bureaucratic, privileged stratum derived from the old intelligentsia and the NEP educated people. To meet the urgent needs of the economy, Stalin forced a rapid growth which was costly and wasteful. The immediate causes of the waste were insufficient planning, too much construction undertaken too rapidly and haphazardly with an underfed, malnourished and disenfranchised work force. But an inner dynamic was also at work, which came from the particular social relations this system engendered. Serge's writings implicitly recognize the emerging social relations. His novels do particular justice to the temperament and behavior of the various sectors of Soviet society. His discussion of the consciousness of the bureaucracy, forged both by their origins and their functions, is especially insightful as portrayed in The Case of Comrade Tulayev.

4.8 The Trials Begin -- Even Silence is Suspect

"So Long as the man is in your hands, there is always a way of framing him"

"So long as you have the neck, the rope will be found somewhere"⁹⁶

Stalin's policy had its critics, and Serge commended the brave agricultural technicians and experts who denounced "the

⁹⁵Christian Rakovsky, "The 'Professional Dangers' of Power," (letter to Valentinov), collected in Rakovsky, Selected Writings on Opposition in the USSR 1923-30, Allison & Busby, London, 1980, p.128.

⁹⁶Well-known sayings in Russian revolutionary circles, quoted by Serge in RTYA, p. 64.

blunders and excesses; they were arrested in thousands and made to appear in huge sabotage-trials so that responsibility might be unloaded on somebody."⁹⁷ This was the beginning of the hunt for enemies, which climaxed in a mighty crescendo in the years of the Great Terror of 1936-38. The need for scapegoats, to blame someone else for the mistakes and just the difficulties of life, would become even more desperate and frenzied as Stalin's 'blunders and excesses' multiplied and grew worse.

Stalin's rule by edicts and commands, enforced with ruthless force and continual purges, eliminated real and potential opponents, conveniently blaming them for the difficulties engendered by his breakneck policies. The accusation of sabotage was directed, as Serge noted, "at thousands, or rather tens of thousands of technicians" which "was in general a monstrous slander justified solely by the need to find culprits for an economic situation that was now insupportable."⁹⁸ By 1930 those who hoarded silver coins were shot as the ruble disappeared; a crisis in the coal industry led to the execution of five Shakhty engineers⁹⁹; the meat shortage caused by the peasants killing their livestock led to the execution of Professor Karatygin (of the Department of Meat and Canned Goods) and his 47 co-defendants, for sabotage of the meat supply. Serge noted that on the day these 48 men were massacred, Stalin gave Rabindranath Tagore a splendid reception

⁹⁷Memoirs, p. 248.

⁹⁸Ibid.

⁹⁹In the Donbass region in May 1928, 53 engineers were accused of wrecking equipment, organizing accidents and having links with the former bourgeois owners of the coal mines. The misuse of equipment, due to the inexperience of the new workforce and the intolerable tempo of production, led to fire and explosions in the mines, giving the regime a pretext to repress technicians, who were used as scapegoats to warn others.

replete with speeches about the new humanism and abundance.¹⁰⁰

From 1928-1931 a series of sensational and well publicized trials of specialists featured confessions to extravagant charges. The presiding judge was A. Ia. Vyshinskii.¹⁰¹ In November 1930 the so-called "Industrial Party" was on trial, and its leader Ramzin confessed to plotting military intervention from foreign capitals. Serge called it 'raving madness.' Although the accused confessed to "infinitely more than can be believed" to escape execution, their confessions rarely saved them. Those who did not confess simply disappeared. Serge commented: "they are strange trials, in which the accused accuse each other more than they are themselves accused, going to the point of flagrant enormities in their self-flagellatory zeal."¹⁰²

The so-called "Toiling Peasant Party," whose leaders Kondratiev and Makarov opposed total collectivization, was "liquidated off-stage " in 1930. They were accused of conspiring with kulaks to revive the Socialist Revolutionary Party and overthrow the Soviet system. There was a secret trial of bacteriologists in August 1930.¹⁰³ Thirty-five leading figures in the Commissariat of Agriculture, many of whom were old Communists were executed in 1930. Secret trials of

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Serge wrote an unpublished sketch of Vishinsky which he titled "El Ciudadano Vichinsky." Serge recounted how in the Lubianka in 1933 his cellmate Nesterov told him how Vishinsky had organized strikes in the Ukraine to paralyze the workings of the Soviets, and that Vichinsky was known as a counterrevolutionary. The paradox was that now Vishinsky presided over the courts which sent revolutionaries to their death, though this time at the behest of the Party and the regime of the Soviets! 'El Ciudadano Vichinsky' (in Spanish), 1947, 3pp, Serge archives, Mexico.

¹⁰² Serge, RTYA, P. 174.

¹⁰³ Charged with organizing a horse epidemic. Conquest, The Great Terror, p. 733.

historians (Tarle¹⁰⁴, Platonov and Kare) took place in 1931. There were similar trials of geologists¹⁰⁵, physicists, (Academician Lazarev), etc.¹⁰⁶ Shortages and imbalances were now the result of deliberate and criminal sabotage -- allowing the regime a convenient if fantastic explanation for its own mistakes. Shooting 'saboterus' also gave the regime a way to get rid of an unreliable elite drawn from the revolutionary generation of Communists and former bourgeois specialists (unreliable because they had the capacity and inclination to think critically).

¹⁰⁴Academician Tarle, according to Serge, the "only non-Marxist Soviet historian of repute, spent long months in prison and was deported to Alma-Ata; today [1942] he is the most official of all historians in the Soviet Union." Memoirs p. 250.

¹⁰⁵The geologists were imprisoned for "having interpreted subsoil qualities differently from what was wanted in high places: ignorance of the natural wealth of the country, hence sabotage, hence treason...." Serge, RTYA, p. 53. In this work, Serge also described in detail what happened to Soviet literature, when intellectual freedom was completely extinguished, and to the masterful authors who were censored, banned and purged.

¹⁰⁶Roy Medvedev, in his Let History Judge, describes these trials in detail, quoting verbatim testimony and defendant's depositions. Medvedev shows that not only were the charges 'ridiculous' but gave the impression that the first Five Year Plan couldn't have been discussed in any detail at the XVIth Party Conference in April 1929, and that the people's commissariats were "not headed by communists, [but] that wreckers were in complete control of the economic and state machinery." Medvedev, pp. 111-139.

Robert Conquest, in The Great Terror, describes the trials in an appendix as the dress rehearsal for the great purge trials of 1936-1938, in which the system developed in the earlier trials was perfected. The technicians of the earlier trials, Conquest asserts, learned these lessons: the number of accused was too high, and should be kept to around 18; a complicated story that would baffle the ordinary observer/reader was necessary [leaving only a general effect]; and in Vyshinsky, "a man had been found capable of mastering such a complexity, and imposing it upon the witnesses" Conquest, p. 739.

The planners came under especially extreme political pressure, as they predicted the disastrous consequences of particular governmental decisions. Groman, the old socialist with a Menshevik past was the principal exponent of equilibrium planning for optimum economic development. He and his whole working group were dismissed and criminally tried in a public show trial in March 1931, accused of the crime of deliberately retarding the country's industrial development. Serge wrote that Groman was arrested after quarreling with Miliutin at the Planning Commission. The very idea of balance between different sectors of the economy began to be politically suspect¹⁰⁷, and Groman's exasperation under pressure led him to shout to Miliutin that the country was being led to the abyss.¹⁰⁸ The example of the Groman group's repression directly influenced the development of the Soviet style of planning. The system became one of command in which planners preferred, as the statistician Strumilin said, "to stand for high growth rates rather than to sit [be imprisoned] for low ones."¹⁰⁹ The original plan figures gave way to optimism and fantasy in terms of what could be achieved, causing the imbalances which have become permanent features of the Soviet economy.

Serge wrote in the Memoirs that the slander heaped on these specialists could not withstand close scrutiny, although in RTYA he admits that in some cases there was perhaps a smidgen of truth at the core of the fantastic claims:

"Some, honest men, contest the value of hastily recast and militarily applied plans. They foresee disastrous results and sometimes they even refuse to comply with demands which they consider absurd but which are in reality only demagogic, whether it be for the purpose

¹⁰⁷See G. Hosking's brief summary in The First Socialist Society: A History of the Soviet Union from Within, chapter 6, pp. 149-153 and 172-174.

¹⁰⁸Serge, Memoirs, p. 249.

¹⁰⁹Hosking, ibid, p. 151.

of bluffing foreign opinion, of duping domestic opinion, or in the case of zealous administrators, of pulling the wool over the eyes of the government; Others follow the course of the-worse-the-better, thinking that 'this can't last.' Some of them sabotage, thinking that the hour has finally struck for the long awaited catastrophe of Bolshevism. And, indeed, never has the situation been so bad since the worst moments of the civil war and the blockade. Some engineers are subsidized by emigres whom they keep informed or by spies who flatter them. Above all, scapegoats are needed."¹¹⁰

The last line is the most significant, because it set a pattern of response for decades to come: when things go badly, never take responsibility, always blame someone else, someone less powerful, usually local officials. Another harbinger of things to come, noted by Serge, was the way "the patriotism of the technicians was constantly appealed to in the course of wringing confessions out of them."¹¹¹

Serge pointed out that industrialization proceeded amid "such chaos and under an authoritarian system of such rigidity, that it was possible to find 'sabotage' in any place, at any moment."¹¹² Serge added that in his own experience he had observed the "whole mentality of the technician is quite antagonistic to sabotage, dominated as it is by love of technique and a job well done. ..All that there was in fact was a fairly widespread 'technocratic mentality'. Technicians saw themselves as indispensable and as distinctly superior to the men in the Government."¹¹³

Serge thought the trials were only used to manipulate public opinion, at home and abroad: the sentences, prescribed

¹¹⁰ RTYA, p. 173.

¹¹¹ Memoirs, p. 248.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid., pp. 248-249.

by the Politburo itself, were often rescinded, seemingly arbitrarily.¹¹⁴

During the Menshevik Center Trial Serge met with people every day who were connected with the accused and was thus in a position to "trace, line by line, the progression of the lie in their evidence." Later, when the old historian Sukhanov was incarcerated in the Isolator of Verkhne-Uralsk, Serge wrote that he had documents circulated among political prisoners detailing the methods used by the G.P.U. to extract confessions. Serge told how a combination of death threats and appeals to patriotism were used, Medvedev's citation of Iakobovitch and I.I. Rubin's¹¹⁵ deposition leaves no doubt that confessions were also extracted under physical and mental torture.¹¹⁶

Isaac Rubin was described by Serge as a protege of David Borisovich Riazonov, whom Serge met a number of times. Riazonov had created a "scientific establishment of noteworthy quality" at the Marx-Engels Institute. Riazonov, Sukhanov, Groman, Rubin and Ginsberg had a sort of salon in the Planning Commission where they freely discussed the 'utterly catastrophic' situation

¹¹⁴So that some of the accused, e.g. physicist Lazarev, were rehabilitated, while others (the 'pretended' Mensheviks) disappeared. Serge commented that he had dinner with one expert in energetics who had been condemned to death, pardoned, sent to a concentration camp, rehabilitated, and decorated, all in the space of 20 months. Memoirs, pp. 249-250.

¹¹⁵ Isaac Rubin's interpretive works on Marx's Capital and the history of the labor theory of value remain among the outstanding theoretical contributions of the 1920's. See I.I. Rubin, The History of Economic Thought, edited and translated by Donald A. Filtzer, London, Ink Links Ltd., 1979.

¹¹⁶Medvedev, op. cit., pp. 125-137. Iakubovich's deposition was written in May 1967, while the account of Rubin's years in solitary confinement and horrible torture was written by his sister B.I. Rubina. These men, Sukhanov and Riazonov survived to be rearrested and shot in 1937.

in the country in 1930.¹¹⁷ Serge greatly respected Riazonov for his steadfast honor and independence: he had never failed to denounce the death penalty, and demanded strict limits on the activities of the GPU, as he had with its predecessor, the Cheka. Riazonov provided an intellectual haven at his institute for 'heretics of all kinds' so long as they had a 'love of knowledge.' During the trial of the Menshevik Center, Riazonov went to each member of the Politburo to express his rage at such fabrications and monstrosities. After a violent exchange with Stalin, in which Riazonov accused the General Secretary of concocting incriminating evidence against old Socialists, he was arrested and deported. His books were removed from the libraries, although he had just been officially recognized in a celebration of his 60th birthday. Serge noted that he died "alone and captive, nobody knows where" sometime around 1940.¹¹⁸

These tumultuous events which affected the lives of millions of people coincided with fierce inner-party struggle, even after the defeat of the Left and United Opposition, beaten in Serge's words, by the "hierarchy of secretaries, in a kind of interlocking directorate with the commissars of the GPU under the guidance of the General Secretary, the so-recently obscure Georgian, Stalin."¹¹⁹ Once the left was routed, Stalin turned his attention to defeating the Right. Bukharin, Tomsky and Rykov opposed Stalin on the policy of forced collectivization and what they saw as premature industrialization. Serge called the Right Opposition "more of a state of mind than an organization; at certain junctures it included the great majority of officials, and enjoyed the sympathy of the whole

¹¹⁷ Serge, Memoirs, pp. 250-252.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Serge, "Trente Ans Apres La Revolution russe" (TAALRR) p. 20.

nation."¹²⁰ Henry Grigorievich Yagoda sympathized with the Right, as did Kalinin and Voroshilov, but as Serge noted, for "personal motives whose nature is still obscure" gave a majority to Stalin and Molotov. In actual fact, the so-called right never created a clear cut faction, as Stalin himself admitted¹²¹ but remained loyal members of the Party who disagreed with Stalin's line.

Within the Party, the Right fought to save itself from expulsion, while the Zinoviev tendency, forces intact, was reinstated. Bukharin, the theoretician of 'socialism in one country' who in 1925 encouraged the peasants to enrich themselves, told Kamenev in a secret meeting, organized by Sokolnikov in the summer of 1928: "He will slay us,... he is the new Genghis Khan."¹²² And, Bukharin added, "If the country

¹²⁰ Memoirs, p. 253. The widespread support the Right Opposition enjoyed owed much to the improved situation following War Communism in agriculture and the arts. This was attributed to the NEP, widely identified with Bukharin.

¹²¹ Stalin, Sochineniia, XI, p. 287, quoted in Medvedev, p. 68.

¹²² Kamenev summarized the conversation which the Moscow Trotskyists then leaked abroad. Deutscher gives a full account in the second volume of his Trotsky trilogy, pp. 440-442.

This meeting took place as Bukharin attempted to block with the Left to defeat Stalin. Serge recounted how Trotsky wrote the Oppositionists from Alma-Ata that since the Right represented the danger of a slide toward capitalism, that they should support the Centre -- Stalin -- against it. While this may seem incredible, it follows because the Trotskyists refused to engage in 'unprincipled combinationism' that is, block with groupings whose politics are dissimilar with the purpose of getting rid of a leadership. Serge wrote that Stalin at this time sounded out the leaders of the imprisoned Left Opposition, promising rehabilitation if they supported him against the Right. Serge said his Opposition group discussed the issue "with uncertainty" and Boris Mikhailovich Eltsin, from his prison cell in Suzdal, demanded a conference of the Oppositionists (including Trotsky) to come to a resolution. The conference never took place. Serge, Memoirs, p. 253.

perishes, we all perish [i.e. the Party]. If the country manages to recover, he twists around in time and we still perish." Serge's Opposition centre published the account of this secret meeting, and wrote that they -- "Our 'Centre' (B.M. Eltsin) may very well have much to answer for in publishing these documents."¹²³ Yet as Stalin defeated the Right, they followed in Zinoviev and Kamenev's footsteps, recognizing the 'errors of their ideas' and capitulating to stay within the Party.

As Stalin easily defeated the right, Serge commented on the essential, 'overwhelming fact' of what had happened.

"... by means of a 'coup de force' within the Party, the revolutionary Party-State becomes a bureaucratic police state, a state which is reactionary in every important way with respect to the ideals of the revolution. Ideological changes speed up brutally. A Marxism of dead slogans born in offices takes the place of a critical Marxism of thinking men. The cult of the leader begins. 'Socialism in one country' becomes the password of parvenus who intend no more than the protection of their new privileges. What opponents of the regime see with a kind of anguished myopia is the profile of a new, emerging state, a totalitarian regime. The majority of the old-Bolshevik opponents of Trotsky -- the Bukharins, Rykovs, Tomsiks and Riutins -- are horrified at the sight,¹²⁴ and pass over to the resistance. Too late."

Bukharin's comments to Kamenev, followed by his capitulation, perfectly illustrates the way Stalin's totalitarian regime was able to use the old Bolsheviks against one another, because "it had a hold on their souls" through Party patriotism. Stalin was thus able to confuse, humiliate,

¹²³ Memoirs p. 258. The Opposition published the two documents [Kamenev's confidential resume of his meeting with Bukharin, and Kamenev's notes for Zinoviev] abroad and illegally in Moscow in 1928. Serge quoted the essential passages in his From Lenin to Stalin, with comments, pp. 95-100.

¹²⁴ Serge, TAALRR, p. 20.

and wear out the oppositions.¹²⁵ A natural consequence of the crushing of freedom of opinion within the Party meant that duplicity prevailed. Serge said the 'capitulator comrades' still kept their ideas and met clandestinely.¹²⁶ He met Smilga in 1929 who summarized the thinking of these men. "The Opposition is all astray with its sterile bitterness. One's duty is to work with and in the Party. What do our petty deportations amount to? Oughtn't we all to be walking around by now with our heads tucked underneath our arms?"¹²⁷

In the remaining years of the First Five Year plan, Stalin continually uncovered 'plots' in the Party. The alleged 'rightist-leftist' bloc of Syrtsov and Lominadze was attacked by the press. Their so-called group also included Yan Sten, the philosopher. Also known as the 'Young Stalinist Left,' they were arrested and accused of opposition in 1930.¹²⁸

The Riutin group, imprisoned in late 1932, was a more real threat to Stalin than the scapegoats and dissatisfied who were framed in the years after the defeat of the Right. Riutin, who Serge remembered for having organized "gangs of thugs against us," was close to intellectuals in the Bukharin tendency, all "Red Professors." His supporters in Moscow included the old Bolshevik worker Kayurov, and the Red Professors Slepkov, Maretskii, and others. Riutin, former Secretary of the Moscow

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Later, Andrew Smith recounted in his book I Was A Soviet Worker that in 1934, the clandestine Oppositionists in the factories were the most vociferous pro-Stalinists, railing against the Opposition to divert attention from themselves and their work. Smith, I Was A Soviet Worker, New York, E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1936, p. 268.

¹²⁷ Memoirs, p. 258.

¹²⁸ In reality, Syrtsov and co. had expressed doubts about the excessive growth targets (Stalin often doubled suggested targets) and the regime's disregard for the livestock disaster.

Committee, drew up a document of nearly 200 pages¹²⁹ which amounted to a program of reform for the Party and the Nation. He distributed the document, according to Serge, to Zinoviev, Kamenev, and "several of us." The document called for 'peace with the peasants' in much the same vein as the politics of the Bukharinists. (An end to forced collectivization and a slowing of the pace of industrialization) Placing blame squarely on Stalin, Riutin's document called for the reinstatement of Trotsky and all the Oppositionists and for a 'fresh start.' An entire chapter was devoted to Stalin, "the evil genius of the Party and the revolution."¹³⁰ Zinoviev was kicked out of the Party (again) for reading the document without informing on its authors.

The Riutin affair posed a serious threat to the regime and became a test of loyalty in the Politburo. The GPU and Stalin recommended the death penalty. This would have been the first execution of a Central Committee. A majority in the Politburo, led by Sergei Kirov, refused to go along with the death penalty and Riutin was exiled, rather than killed. What the Riutin affair demonstrated was that Stalin was still unable to control the Party in late 1932, years after the defeat of the Left and Right Oppositions. Kirov's obvious popularity as Party Chief in Leningrad (Zinoviev's old power base) and his ability to stymie Stalin's wishes marked him as a serious opponent to Stalin.

4.9 The Remaining Left Oppositionists Purged

By 1929 the core of the Opposition was reduced to three comrades in liberty: Serge and Alexandra Bronstein in Leningrad,

¹²⁹The Riutin affair is discussed widely in the literature: see Ciliga, Serge, Trotsky, Deutscher, Conquest, Hosking, Getty, etc. Ciliga summarizes the program, in his Russian Enigma, pp. 279-280. Ciliga's information is based on the members of Riutin's group who were sent to the Verkhne-Uralsk Isolator where Ciliga was imprisoned.

¹³⁰ Ciliga, Ibid.

and Andreu Nin in Moscow. The rest of the key members were in exile or jail, including Leon Sosnovsky, Eleazer Solnstsev, Vassily Pankratov and Grigory Yakovin in jail; Maria Mikhailovna Joffe¹³¹ in Central Asia; Fedor Dingelstedt in Central Siberia; Muralov in exile on the Irtysh in the Tara forests; Rakovsky in Central Siberia; and Trotsky in Alma Ata. The rest, numbering up to a thousand according to Serge, were in prison or deported, engaging in hunger strikes, and other possible forms of struggle. Serge wrote: "Our intellectual activity is prodigious, our political action nil."¹³² There was no contact between the remaining Left Oppositionists and the capitulators. The times were very difficult and would only get worse. Trotsky's secretary Georgi Butov died after a long hunger strike, during which he was tortured. Yakov Grigorievich Blumkin was killed. According to Serge Blumkin had been sent to Constantinople to spy on the Old Man, as Trotsky was called, but instead acted as a courier, bringing a message from Trotsky to Serge and the other Oppositionists. Blumkin was arrested and sentenced to death. Serge noted that between arrest and execution, Blumkin won a fortnight's reprieve to write his memoirs, which "made a first-rate book..."¹³³ Blumkin's execution was the first of its kind, a Party member was executed for being in contact with Trotsky.¹³⁴ Alexander Orlov wrote

¹³¹ Adolf Joffe's second wife, who miraculously survived decades of hard labor and constant interrogation in the far north. See her memoir, One Long Night, New Park Publications, London, 1978.

¹³² Memoirs, p. 254.

¹³³ Ibid., p. 257. Perhaps the new policy of candor in the Soviet Union could be used to find out if this book survived.

¹³⁴ Deutscher presents an account of Blumkin's life and the episode which brought him the death sentence in the Prophet Outcast, pp. 84-91. Although he quoted Serge's account, it is different than Serge's on several counts. See Serge, Memoirs, pp. 255-257.

that Blumkin shouted "Long live Trotsky" as the fatal bullets were fired. Serge recalled that it was still possible for the few survivors to assemble in the gardens of the Marx-Engels Institute to exchange scraps of information and lament the loss of comrades, such as Blumkin.

One of the things they discussed was whether to publish information abroad about the struggle. Serge was in favor of sending everything to their comrades in the West, beginning with the letters of Zinoviev and Kamenev in 1924 which describe Stalin's suggestion that they get rid of Trotsky 'by a Florentine technique.' Others were less open than Serge, afraid to wash dirty linen in public and discredit the regime!

Serge managed to send Trotsky in 1929 a voluminous correspondence smuggled out of the Verkhne-Uralsk Isolator written in microscopic characters on strips of paper -- this was the last communication Trotsky received from his comrades.¹³⁵ Trotsky's Bulletin of the Opposition reached Serge and his comrades in bits and pieces for a while and then not at all. Communication was cut off, but ironically Serge wrote that the one place Socialist inquiry continued was in the prison yards, where imprisoned officials talked freely of Trotsky's thoughts.

Serge said they were upset to learn that Trotsky defended in principle the death penalty, recently applied to Blumkin; and that he accepted the sabotage charges against the Mensheviks and technicians. Since the charges against the Mensheviks -- that the conspiracy was directed in agreement with the French General Staff -- was obviously outrageous at face value, how could Trotsky make such a mistake? What did it say about his attitude to opponents? Deutscher explained that Trotsky later regretted his mistake, that the element of truth in the charges, that Groman had sought to obstruct the First Five Year Plan

¹³⁵ Ibid., p. 260.

explained, although it did not justify, Trotsky's mistake.¹³⁶ Serge, again, proved more magnanimous: although clearly distressed with the implications of Trotsky's position, Serge longed to inform him of the truth. Whereas Serge admitted that Trotsky "was grossly mistaken" and "under the unfortunate influence of his Party patriotism," he conceded that the monstrous lies of the Press seemed "sensible" and that Trotsky would have been "unable to imagine the state of inhumanity, cynicism, and mania that our police-apparatus had sunk to."¹³⁷ One can only imagine the surviving Oppositionists' frustration - - cut off from communication, unable to tell the truth even to their own members, much less the world community.

Serge was able, because he and his writings survived, to make an important contribution to our understanding of the mechanism of repression, the advent of the bureaucratic totalitarian state, and the fate of the repressed. Serge's concern with the nameless and faceless victims lost to Stalinism was singular. His writings, in a sense, served as their voices.

Serge wrote pages and pages devoted to simply giving names and telling stories. The Memoirs, From Lenin to Stalin, and especially Destiny of a Revolution are living testaments of the men and women who struggled and resisted -- some more resolutely than others -- the crushing of the revolution and its ideals by Stalin and his faction. All of Serge's books contain thumbnail sketches of many of the men and women who devoted their lives to

¹³⁶Deutscher, The Prophet Outcast, p. 163. Naum Jasny, who dedicated his Soviet Industrialization 1928-1952 to Vladimir Gustavovich Groman confirmed in a reminiscence of Groman that he had backed Stalin and Bukharin until 1928, opposing Trotsky on industrialization. When Stalin made his 'left turn' the Mensheviks were brought to trial.

¹³⁷Memoirs, p. 260.

the struggle for socialism¹³⁸: many turn to his Memoirs precisely for that reason, to find out what so and so said, how he looked, what he thought.

From Lenin to Stalin contains many sketches, as well as long quotes from Serge's personal correspondence with leading Bolsheviks, as well as ordinary citizens. Destiny of a Revolution devotes six chapters to outlining who filled what prisons, what individual and collective resistance took place

¹³⁸To be more precise: FLTS quoted the fate and last words of Trotsky's closest collaborators and of the Zinovievists, written with the passion of a committed journalist and historian, whose facts must stand up to scrutiny, and with the prose of a poet whose words sear the consciousness of the reader. The book is filled with long quotes from letters Serge received, while it was still possible to correspond. Later, Serge quoted from reports smuggled out of the prisons and camps. The contradictory character of many of the revolution's literati was revealed by Serge, who knew them all or had access to others who did. How else would we know Blumkin wrote a memoir, or how Solntsev died, or that Muralov refused capitulation to the very end?

RTYA gives case histories of A. Tarov, Trotskyist, the SRs Abraham Gortz and Leo Gerstein, Boris Chernov, and Volkenstein; Social Democrats George Kuchin, Sommer, Goldenberg, Ramishvili, Eva Broido; Anarchists Rogdayev, Baron, Barmash, Gerassimchik, Inaun, Sandomirsky, the Tuscan syndicalist Gaggi, etc. Oppositionists Albert Heinrichsen, Vassili Chadev, Georg Butov, Yakov Blumkin, Silov, Rabinovich, Yoselevich, Blumenfeld, Sosnovsky, Leon Papermeister, Helen Tsulukidze, Old Bolshevik Kote Tsintasadze, Eleazar Solntsev, Trotsky, Alexandra Bronstein, Yakovin, Pankratov, Pevzner, Socrates Gayvorkian, Dvinsky, Man Nevelson (married to Trotsky's daughter Nina), Aaron, Paul and Samuel Papermeister, Anna Yankovskaya, Marie Ivanovna, Ida Lemelman, Boris Mikhailovich Eltsin, Victor Eltsin, Maria Mikhailovna Yoffe, Lado Dumbadze, Lado Yenukidze, Joseph Krasskin, Vladimir Kossior, Mikhail Andreyevich Polevoy, Trukhanov, Nicolai Muralov, Mikhail Bodrov, Dora Zack, Ida Shumskaya, Boris Ilych Lakhovitsky, Alexis Semenovitch Santalov, Lyda Svalova, Yakov Belenky, Yakov Byk, Fanya Upstein, Leonid Girchek, Vassily Mikhailovich Chernykh ... the democratic centralist Oppositionists Vladimir Smirnov and Timothy Saprionov, the capitulators Zinoviev, Kamenev, Ivan Smirnov, Eismont, Tolmachev, Red Professors Sliepkov, Astrov, Maretsky, Eikhenwald, Worker-Bolshevik Kayurov, Worker Oppositionist Shliapnikov and Medvedyev, and more....

there, the fate of workers, youth, peasants, scientists, writers, teachers, and tells us in great detail the fate of the anarchists, the socialists, the communists, the life and death of the Oppositionists, the Capitulators, and even of Stalin's coterie. The book is a living memorial to the actors and victims of the revolution, 20 years on. Every scholar should have recourse to this book, although it has been out of print for 50 years. There is no room in this study to repeat or verify Serge's histories and thumbnail sketches,¹³⁹ although any study of the fate of Stalin's opponents that doesn't consult Serge is lacking a vital source. By naming names and telling what happened to the nameless and faceless Serge has in effect cemented the first bricks in the national Memorial to Stalin's dead that the Soviets have just agreed to build.¹⁴⁰ Serge's artist son, Vlady, is drawing up a proposal to build a monument in the USSR¹⁴¹ which would feature a sculpture of Stalin standing on a heap of cadavers, surrounded by bricks with the names of victims engraved on them.¹⁴²

¹³⁹I have tried throughout to repeat only those activities of Serge's which illuminate our understanding of the functioning of the Opposition and Serge's role within, as well as to quote revealing passages of leading personalities that round out our perceptions of these characters.

¹⁴⁰19th Party Conference Decision, 28 June 1988. The initiative was animated by the group 'Memoryal,' a band of scholars, lawyers and history buffs who took to the streets with a petition which earned them detention, fines, harassment and threats. The group has demanded a monument attached to a museum, an archive of repression that will allow people to trace a victim's arrest, the name of his interrogator, and the time and manner of his fate, or as much of this as is known. New York Times, July 2, 1988.

¹⁴¹Serge told his son Vlady shortly before he died that although he wouldn't live to see it, Vlady probably would -- monuments to Trotsky and to Stalin in the public squares of Russian cities. Memoirs, p. xxii.

¹⁴²Vlady, private conversation, 3 July 1988.



4.10 Persecution comes home

Like all Oppositionists still at large, Serge was subjected to police surveillance. He lived in a communal apartment in Leningrad with his wife, son and 9 others,¹⁴³ among them three GPU agents who spied on his comings and goings, opened his mail, and reported his conversations. Two more 'guardian angels' followed his every step outside his apartment. The agents made no attempt to hide their spying on Serge. Sometimes Serge was warned that he was about to be charged with treason for his foreign correspondence, that he should be more discreet. On his frequent trips to Moscow, Serge found he couldn't stay with friends, relatives or anyone without compromising them so he often squatted in houses which had just been emptied by the GPU. Serge noticed that his friends and acquaintances, including Bukharin, avoided him in the street. The Italian Angelo Tasca, on the Comintern Executive, warned Serge that every time there were "three of you together, one of you is an agent provocateur."¹⁴⁴ As Serge commented, his crime, the crime of the Opposition, was simply that he existed.

The torment went on for five years. Persecution descended on his entire family who suffered for their Serge connection. Serge's father-in-law, the old revolutionary Russakov¹⁴⁵, was

¹⁴³Serge mentioned conditions in his communal flat in various writings: see Memoirs, his article "Complots en URSS," La Wallonie, and Twenty Years After, where Serge wrote that his in-laws (the Russakovs) lived in the same communal flat.

¹⁴⁴Memoirs, p. 274.

¹⁴⁵Russakov had fought in the 1905 Revolution in Rostov, had been Secretary to the Russian Seamen's Union in Marseilles, was expelled from France in 1918 for organizing a strike on ships loaded with munitions for the Whites. Serge was on the same boat bound for Russia in 1918 as the Russakovs. He married Russakov's daughter Liuba, and Pierre Pascal, the French Left Oppositionist married Russakov's daughter Jenny. In the Soviet Union Russakov was a dye-worker.

driven from his factory and union, indicted along with his wife and daughter, Serge's wife, as suspected anti-semites, counter-revolutionaries, capitalists, and terrorists; whole factories demanded they be put to death. Party faithful and GPU agents came to the communal apartment which Serge shared with his in-laws to taunt him, once even slapping Serge's wife in her face. Serge was with Panait Istrati in the Bykovo Woods while this went on, and Serge intimated that the GPU only went ahead with this persecution because they had lost sight of Serge. After two trials, and the intervention of Serge and Panait Istrati, (they went to see Kalinin and others) the inquiry fizzled out. But In 1932 the persecution was resumed. Russakov, out of work, was denied a bread card and an internal passport.¹⁴⁶ He died from the privations. The affair devastated Panait Istrati, who subsequently returned to France and wrote about it widely.¹⁴⁷

Serge's wife was driven mad by the constant persecution. Liuba Russakova endured nine years of terrible persecution against her entire family, bore a daughter while Serge and her son Vlady were deported to Orenburg, and even after their expulsion from the Soviet Union, continued to suffer persecution by the GPU, and live in fearful tension of the Gestapo. Serge took her from clinic to clinic while still in the Soviet Union, but said they were full of GPU agents who won the confidences of

¹⁴⁶The only semi-bright spot in this sordid affair was when The Workers and Peasants' Inspectorate held their own trial and had Russakov reinstated in the union, although they couldn't find him a job. The investigator for the Inspectorate was a young man, "who displayed a singular honesty" named Nikolayev. Serge never found out if it was the same Nikolayev who shot Kirov in 1934. Memoirs, p. 278.

¹⁴⁷The story about Serge's family is found in the Memoirs, pp. 277-8, 294-5, 322; Destiny of a Revolution, p. 111-114, "Una Voce Dal Gulag: Lettere Inedite di Victor Serge," Revista di Storia Contemporanea, no.3, 1978, pp. 426-445, Panait Istrati, Vers L'Autre Flamme, 149-194. and Pierre Pascal, Mon Journal de Russie, Tome troisieme: 1922-1926, and Tome quatrieme: 1927.

the patients while treating their problems! Liuba's nerves couldn't stand the strain and she withdrew to the world of insanity. Serge's letters in the first period of exile in Europe are filled with references to her condition and the difficulties they faced because of her illness. She entered into a mental institution in the South of France, where she remained until her death in 1985.

All the Oppositionists' families suffered similarly, the most devastated being Trotsky's, which was almost entirely wiped out.¹⁴⁸ Serge survived the tension through work, deriving great pleasure translating the works of Vera Figner, who organized the attempts on the life of Tsar Alexander II that drove Serge's parents into exile. In this terrible atmosphere, Serge wrote: "...the ring closes in relentlessly. The value of human life continuously declines, the lie in the heart of all social relationships becomes even fouler, and oppression ever heavier..."¹⁴⁹

Serge felt he had an excellent chance of disappearing. He petitioned Stalin for a passport. By way of response, Serge was demoted from Deputy Commander of the Front Intelligence Service, a rank corresponding to Colonel or General, which he was surprised to still hold. (This later showed up in the intelligence files of the American FBI, released to this writer through the Freedom of Information Act.) The arrests of Oppositionists and their families continued unabated as the economic and political situation deteriorated. Stalin's wife

¹⁴⁸His grandchild Vsevolod (Sieva) Volkov, the only child to leave the USSR, survives. Trotsky's son Seryozha had a daughter who survived, and Sieva's half-sister surfaced in 1988, only to die three months later. Thirty-six members of the close family perished.

¹⁴⁹Memoirs, pp. 279-280.

Nadezhda Alliluyeva committed suicide¹⁵⁰, and Serge only dared see other Oppositionists at great risk. He managed to see Alexandra Bronstein, and Preobrazhensky.¹⁵¹

4.11 Serge's Last Testament

After many close calls¹⁵², Serge could see in the eyes of the agents in his apartment that arrest was near. Feeling alone and in danger, Serge managed to smuggle a letter to his friends in Paris, Magdeleine and Maurice Paz, Jacques Mesnil and Marcel Martinet. He asked them to publish the letter in case he disappeared. Serge considered the letter his last testament. The letter was dated 1 February 1933, dateline Moscow. Six weeks later Serge was arrested. The testament, or last letter, titled "1933 -- Tout est mis en question" (Everything is put into question) was published in La Revolution proletarienne, May

¹⁵⁰Alexander Orlov, former Soviet diplomat and counter-intelligence chief, wrote that Alliluyeva was shocked by the real conditions her husband's policies had provoked in the country, especially the situation in Ukraine, where famine had caused people to revert to cannibalism. She fought with Stalin over this, and he accused her of "collecting Trotskyite rumors." He treated her with abuse, obscenities and torment, according to Pauker, the chief of Stalin's bodyguard. Orlov wrote that "death was for her the only deliverance from the vulgarity and caddishness ... and from the rude blows [Stalin] inflicted to her human dignity." Orlov, The Secret History of Stalin's Crimes, New York, 1954, pp. 314-326.

¹⁵¹Serge said of his encounter with Preobrazhensky: "...we opened our hearts for a moment in a dark little yard beneath leafless trees. 'I do not know where we are going,' he said. 'They are stopping me from breathing, I expect anything to happen....' Symptoms of moral treason were being uncovered in his economic works on the world crisis. Hands in his pockets, melancholy and hunched against the cold night air, he was, as I inexplicably sensed, a doomed man." Preobrazhensky subsequently disappeared. Memoirs, p. 281.

¹⁵²Serge had missed the call inviting him to a party at which all the guests were arrested; twice Serge managed to escape from comrades' houses just as the GPU were raiding. Memoirs, p. 275.

25, 1933, with the headline "Victor-Serge Arrete."¹⁵³

Fearing his own demise, Serge wrote openly to his friends, asking them to fight for his release, and to take care of Liuba and his son Vlady, should he be killed. More importantly, Serge poured out his thoughts and feelings about the way in which life under totalitarian surveillance was choking him and indeed everyone else. It is in this document that Serge first identified the Soviet Union as a totalitarian State, before Trotsky and well before the 'totalitarian school.'

He also used the opportunity to put forward what he considered essential points that must be guaranteed as intrinsic to the socialist project. These three conditions were:

(1) Defense of Man: respect for the rights of every man, even 'class enemies.' Every man has certain rights, including the right to a secure existence, without which there can be no socialism. Serge spoke in particular against the use of the death penalty, and against the practice of depriving men and women of liberty for mere suspected dissent. (2) Defense of truth: Serge was horrified at the falsification of history already underway and the censorship of news. He said, "I hold truth to be a precondition of intellectual and moral health. To speak of truth is to speak of honesty. Both are the right of men." (3) Defense of thought: Serge denounced the regime's embezzlement of Marxist theory, which it was replacing it with empty slogans. He explained:

"I hold that Socialism cannot develop in the intellectual sense except by the rivalry, scrutiny and struggle of ideas; that we should fear not error, which is mended in time by life itself, but rather stagnation and reaction; that respect for man implies his right to know everything and his freedom to think. It is not against freedom of thought and against man that Socialism can triumph, but on the contrary,

¹⁵³ Titled "La Profession de foi de Victor-Serge," La Revolution proletarienne, Vol. 1933, No. 152, p. 193. Reprinted in Serge's 16 Fusilles, Ou va la Revolution Russe? Paris, Cahiers Spartacus, no. 1, serie nouvelle, 1936.

through freedom of thought, and by improving man's condition."

The document evokes not only the paralysis of one of the hunted, but also the repugnance and daily fear of living in a totalitarian society.

Serge blended the political and personal, as he described the everyday existence which had driven his wife mad, in which privacy was impossible, in which every move was spied and reported on. Questioning the scope of the regime's fear -- it had gone to great lengths to prevent Serge from leaving -- Serge concluded that Stalin was terrified of witnesses, of ideological opponents, and what they would say. Stalin was bitter that Trotsky was out of his reach, and was afraid of another voice against him abroad.

Serge found continuity in Stalin's behavior with that of Ivan the Terrible: 'the same intolerance, the same incapacity to evolve, the same horror of freedom, the same governmental fanaticism and bureaucracy, the same arbitrariness..., the same implacable and gloomy coercion.' Serge concluded the revolution was in a phase of reaction, that the concentration of economic and political power in the hands of the regime had resulted "que l'individu est tenu par le pain, le vetement, le logement, le travail et mis totalement a la discretion de la machine, permet a celle-ci de negliger l'homme et de ne tenir compte que des grands nombres, a la longue."¹⁵⁴

The regime, Serge asserted, was in absolute contradiction with everything stated, proclaimed, thought and intended by the revolution itself. Everything had changed since 1926: now, in 1933, a member of the Party wouldn't even dream of asking a simple political question; the establishment of internal

¹⁵⁴"1933, Tout est mis en question," p. 47 (in 16 Fusilles). Translation: the individual being held by bread, clothing, lodging, and work, and totally at the discretion of the machine, which neglects man and only counts large numbers in a line.

passports, preventing the freedom of movement, would have been thought crazy even two years earlier, according to Serge.

How could this happen? Despite the objective conditions of backwardness and isolation, Serge insisted that the bureaucracy obstinately exercised all the wrong choices, paralyzed intelligent initiative, and set the whole world against it.

"The extreme concentration of power, in the presence of a profoundly embittered and disenchanted population who passively adapt and manage without illusions, increase to a large degree the importance of a handful of men who exercise ... an uncontrolled dictatorship, without even the ability to recognize public opinion."

Even worse, Serge asked the unavoidable and difficult question about the future: when the new men who are developing today put their hands on the levers of totalitarian power tomorrow, where will they take it? Reaction is accumulating, Serge pointed out. When men must fight each other for bread cards and information on scarce lodgings, when civic courage is not tolerated, when the official ideology is so at odds with harsh daily reality that it can only be scoffed at, what kind of social consciousness can emerge? Already Serge bemoaned that the youth were skeptical of ideas and in love with material things, wanting an 'Americanization.' "The reaction at the heart of the revolution puts everything in question, compromising the future, the principles, ... creating an internal danger much more real in the present hour than the external danger...." These are not the words of a discouraged liberal, but of a genuine socialist who saw the future clearly.

Although Serge claimed that he was not a pessimist, he realized that the socialist project would need not only a renewal, but that its name would be soiled because its first experiment was so diseased. Serge wrote that socialism can only win,

"not through imposing itself, but by showing itself superior to capitalism, not in the fabrication of tanks but in the organization of social life; if it offers to man a condition better than capitalism: more

material well-being, more justice, more liberty and a higher dignity."

The duty of a revolutionist in these conditions, Serge concluded, "is a double duty: exterior defense, interior defense." To serve the revolution, one must keep one's eyes open and resist, even if the resistance is only internal. To shut one's eyes 'to the bad' is to become an accomplice. The double duty then, is also to preserve your ideas and defend yourself from the corruption of the revolution.

Serge wrote of the Oppositionist's proposal for a reform, that "elle est impossible et ne pourra se realiser qu'avec le temps --de longues annees -- au prix de luttes longues et penibles. Et rien n'est moins certain que sa reussite. TOUT EST MIS EN QUESTION."

By 1933, then, Serge had made a definitive break with the politics of Party patriotism, and understood that the Party was finished as a vehicle of revolution and reform. Open to new collaborations, Serge wrote his friends,

"je sympathise avec tous ceux qui vont contre le courant, cherchent a sauver les idees, les principes, l'esprit de la revolution d'Octobre. Je crois qu'il faut, por cela, tout revoir en commençant par instituer entre camarades des tendances les plus diverses, une collaboration reellement fraternele dans la discussion et dans l'action."¹⁵⁵

Serge's last testament, which defines what amounts to three inalienable rights of man, is not the document of a libertarian anarchist, nor of liberal reformist. Serge explicitly wrote "Et je ne fais pas ici une apologie du liberalisme." Serge's testament penned from deep within the bowels of totalitarianism, is a rich expression of socialist goals. The

¹⁵⁵Literal translation: I sympathize with all who go against the current, looking to preserve the ideas, principles, and the spirit of the October Revolution. I think that to do that it is a must to review everything, so that we can begin to institute among comrades of the most diverse tendencies, a really fraternal collaboration in discussion and in action.

need for institutional guarantees of what are presumed basic rights has been amply demonstrated in the 55 years since Serge wrote these lines. Serge's testament is that of an authentic revolutionary whose life experience demonstrated intransigently that socialism without liberty and democracy is not and cannot be socialism; that socialism is a superior system which cannot be more retrograde than bourgeois society in terms of the rights of individuals in the sphere of the freedom to think, speak, and organize.

Chapter Four: Section II ORENBURG 1933-1936¹

INTERROGATION AND DEPORTATION: DIGGING THE GRAVES OF THE REVOLUTION

II. 4.12 Crimes of Existence

Serge wrote his last testament letter to his friends in France on 1 Feb. 1933. That same month Sergei Kirov, speaking to Party activists in Leningrad said:

"We shall be pitiless, and not only against the communists who engage in counterrevolutionary activity [that is to say, Oppositionists], but also those lacking in firmness in the factory and the villages and who fail to carry out the plan. Four hundred members of the party have already been sent to the Solovetski Islands."

In early March 1933 the People's Vice-Commissar for Agriculture, Konor, and Wolfe and Kovarsky of the Council of the Commissariat, along with thirty two other agronomists and functionaries, were executed without trial, accused of having had relations with Ukrainian nationalists in Poland.²

The mechanism of repression had swung into high gear. Between 1928-1930 Serge estimated some four to five thousand Oppositionists were arrested³. Socialists, anarchists,

¹Source material from Serge is weakest in this period as he mainly worked on four books which were confiscated upon his expulsion. For that reason, this chapter depends more on Serge's Memoirs for information on his activities, writings and state of mind.

²Serge, FLTS, pp. 68-69.

³ The data Serge quoted was 3000-4000 arrested in early 1928; 1000 more arrested in October 1929; 300 arrested in Moscow in January 1930; another 400-500 arrested on the occasion of the 16th Party Congress in Moscow in May 1930; in August 1930 'several hundreds' more arrested. Those arrested in 1928 ended their five year sentences in 1933-34 at which time their sentences were automatically doubled, usually after being rearrested and charged in connection with the Kirov affair. No more Oppositionists were at large after 1931-32, with the exception of Serge, Alexandra Bronstein and Andre
(continued...)

syndicalists and communists were imprisoned or deportated. At this point nothing could save a suspect: even silence.

Serge's period of precarious liberty drew to a close. In mid March, 1933, he was rearrested. Although arrests were still selective, the sweep of the Opposition was thorough. Rather than the customary 'knock on the door,' the GPU met Serge on the street while he was trying to buy medicine for his ailing wife. He was taken to the new GPU headquarters, a "spacious, stern and magnificent" building.

Serge was immediately taken to the investigating magistrate responsible for Party cases, 'Comrade' Karpovich. Karpovich interrogated Serge for more than 12 hours, using the fact that they were Party comrades to get Serge to understand what was required of him. Serge noted that he was able to get surreptitious information from Karpovich during the 'interview' about the fate of Christian Rakovsky, who had reputedly died in deportation.⁴ The interview covered Serge's views on everything point by point: agrarian policy, industrialization, Comintern, inner-Party regime. Serge stuck to his Oppositionist views, raising Marxist objections to all of Stalin's policies. Following the marathon interrogation, Serge was taken to the same House of Arrest that he had visited in 1928. Noting that prisons are "so durable as to prevail over revolutions and the fall of empires"⁵ Serge began his fourth captivity in the same

³(...continued)

Nin. 1932 marked the resumption of repression in the wake of famine and terror, and with the assassination of Kirov in 1934 the terror escalated dramatically. Serge, RTYA pp. 105-115.

⁴ In fact Rakovsky was sick, not dead. Without any means of effective communication however, rumors circulated freely. Serge wrote in RTYA that for months comrades could not learn whether or not this particular rumor was true. RTYA p. 104. Its also possible that rumors were deliberately planted to demoralize the surviving Oppositionists. This seems to be the case with Rakovsky.

⁵ Memoirs, p. 286.

way as all the others: "Formalities of entry, a registration-office, and a series of partitions through which a man passes like a grain on its way into some intricate milling mechanism."⁶

Serge's first cellmate was another writer who had been cooped up in freezing solitary for months. Their cell was underground and very cold. Serge was quickly transferred to the infamous Lubianka in Moscow. Serge was disturbed and frightened, but "determined to resist unyieldingly" with dignity. He was put in a tiny windowless cell, six by six, used as a waiting cell for prisoners about to be executed. There were ten prisoners, two beds, constant bright light, and a cold tile floor. His cellmates were arrested for far-fetched offenses: one for hearing a 'counter-revolutionary leaflet read out among some friends without denouncing everybody immediately."⁷ With Serge in the same prison were Wolfe, Konar and Kovarsky, the agronomists about to be executed.

From there Serge was escorted to the "prison of prisons" of "noiseless, cell-divided secrecy" where Serge was "in the void, enveloped in a quite astonishing silence."⁸ He spent 85 days in total solitary, broken only by six interrogations. To withstand the tension Serge slept as much as possible and worked diligently. He wrote a play, short stories, poems, all in his head, since he wasn't allowed writing materials or reading matter. He gave himself courses, and admitted that his inner life was "most intense and rich." He was constantly hungry, except on May first, the International Workingman's Day, when Serge was fed a full meal and given cigarettes and matches.

The interrogations were a throwback to Tsarist traditions -relentless and nocturnal. In an aggressive mood for his first, Serge congratulated his interrogator, Magistrate Bogin, for

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Memoirs, p. 288.

⁸ Ibid, p. 190.

resuming this Tsarist ritual. Serge's account of this interrogation reveals the way in which the regime set traps for the Oppositionists, based on appealing to their sense of Party loyalty.

Magistrate Bogin's strategy was to get to Serge politically, as a fellow Party comrade, who should serve the Party by admitting the authority of the Central Committee. Serge understood immediately the trap and retorted that as an expelled member, he was no longer bound by party discipline. Serge was then accused of communicating with Oppositionists and keeping Oppositional documents. They also tried to link Serge to someone he didn't know, a certain 'Solovian.'

The interrogations proceeded thus, with Serge alert to the pitfalls from which he would not escape. Nevertheless, on the night that Konar, Wolfe and the agriculturalists were executed, passing down the same corridors as Serge, he sensed great danger. The next day he was summoned during the day to be interrogated by Rutkovsky, the examining magistrate for 'Serious Oppositional' cases, personal aide to the Head of the Department and a member of the secret Collegium.⁹ Serge recalled being terrified by the implications of Rutkovsky's vicious line of interrogation. Rutkovsky told Serge that this was his last chance to cooperate, and that if Serge didn't try he faced long years of confinement. He then presented Serge with a fantastic document containing wild assertions which had been extracted from Serge's young, apolitical sister-in-law Anita Russakova.¹⁰

⁹ The account of Serge's arrest and interrogations can be found in the Memoirs, pp.285-296.

¹⁰ Anita Russakova, Liuba Kibalchich's young sister had at times been Serge's secretary, taking dictation of his translation work. Serge described her as "an unpolitical girl whose only interest was in music, innocent in all things as a new-born baby." Memoirs p. 294. Serge refused to confirm the lies extorted from Anita under torture and demanded to see her to prove the confession was baseless. According to Serge in
(continued...)

At least that is what Serge believed and wrote in the Memoirs.¹¹

Serge's experience in the Lubianka, followed by three years of deportation in Orenburg, helped him understand how the great Trials were fabricated, how the confessions were dictated and manufactured, and how the accused were 'ripened' through ten years of persecution, demoralization, solitary and torture (including drugs and hypnosis) to sign the baseless documents. In Serge's case, as in others, false testimony was used as the basis for the charges against him. Serge went to his death believing this testimony had been extracted under torture from his apolitical young sister-in-law. It was only in 1989 that we discovered that the entire document had been concocted, without the help of Anita Russakova.¹²

The prepared charges were pure 'ravings' and it was clear that a trap had been set. Serge knew that one bit of wavering would ensure his doom. He said he felt utterly alone and

¹⁰ (...continued)

the Memoirs, his persistence led the GPU to drop the case and release Anita, but she was rearrested in April 1936, just as Serge was released (to prevent their meeting and exposing the lies which had failed against Serge) and spent 25 years in the gulag. Her life was ruined simply because she was related to Serge. Memoirs pp. 293-296, RTYA p. 112, FLTS pp. 77-78, and interview with Vlady, Mexico City, May 1987.

¹¹ In fact it was family lore. Vlady and I went to Moscow in March 1989 and made telephone contact with Anita, still alive, but were unable to procure the proper visa to visit her in Leningrad. Nonetheless in September 1989, two English filmmakers, Les Smith and Roy Battersby, were able to follow up on our contact, and met with Anita who told them she was never arrested in 1933 as told in the Memoirs. She therefore could not have signed the supposed denunciation presented to Serge -- she hadn't even seen it. However, she recounted that when she was arrested in 1936, her interrogation by Rutkovsky was based on the contents of this document! (Anita Russakova, interview with Les Smith and Roy Battersby, Leningrad, September 1989)

¹² See footnote 11 above.

strangled in the dark. He understood that they intended to shoot him, and feeling lost, he was emboldened. He decided to have nothing to do with their lies: that he would never give in, never abandon his communist thought, never worship the gravedigger of the revolution, approve the rebirth of privilege and the boundless misery of workers and peasants.¹³

Serge's refusal to cooperate was more than a passive silence during interrogation. He took the offensive and wrote Rutkovsky every day demanding to confront Anita to expose the lies of the GPU. In so doing, Serge put his inquisitors on trial, rather than the reverse. It was a brave gamble, but it worked. Rutkovsky ended the investigation on the condition that Serge understand that the GPU attached no importance to Anita's evidence. (In fact their own invented evidence.) Serge was immediately granted books to read, one hour's exercise per day, news of his family, and a package from the Political Red Cross. This last was a signal to Serge that his disappearance was known to the international community and that his friends in Paris had been activated on the issue.¹⁴ More than Serge's aggressive behavior, the international attention drawn to his case probably influenced the GPU's decision to deport, rather than shoot

¹³ Serge, Memoirs, pp. 284-296, From Lenin to Stalin, p. 77-78. In Serge's novel Midnight in the Century his characters Ryzhik and Elkin act in a similarly bold, forthright and almost reckless manner, attacking Stalin's politics from the year 1907 on, denouncing his crimes and his role as gravedigger. We assume this was Serge's stance during his interrogation. See MITC, pp. 65, 143, & especially pp. 165-167, 169-171.

¹⁴In fact his comrades acted immediately upon hearing of his arrest, to set up a Committee Victor-Serge to campaign for his release and raise money to support him while in deportation. Jacques Mesnil and Magdeleine Paz especially worked tirelessly for years on this issue, writing in La Revolution proletarienne and other left journals, attending meetings, badgering human rights committees, progressive lawyers in the Association Juridique Internationale, the Congress of writers, and so forth. The material relating to the campaign is voluminous. See RP, 1933-1936.

Serge. Although it is clear that as a French author and Bolshevik Oppositionist militant, Serge's case was atypical -- a Russian Oppositionist author would probably have disappeared forever -- nevertheless, we can learn a great deal about the conduct of the purges by examining Serge's experience.

Serge's comportment under interrogation was remarkable, but not unique. One aspect of the 'show trials' during the Great Purge of 1936-1938 was that the interrogation process seemed infallible and the GPU could get anyone to confess anything. Indeed, Deputy People's Commissar of Internal Affairs Zakovsky, "a former criminal who had been convicted of murder before the Revolution, boasted that he would have been able to make Marx himself confess to working for Bismarck."¹⁵ Yet contrary to Zakovsky and Orwell (who said a torture can be found to break anyone) and others, some, like Serge, were able to withstand physical and psychological torture and resist. For example, in the same Moscovskiye novosti article, Ambartsumov cited the protocols of the Piatakov-Radek trial, in which 36 cases were prepared but only 19 people were tried -- the 19 who 'broke.' The remaining 17 defendants wouldn't confess.

From the Lubianka Serge was taken to the old Butyrki jail, where he was left alone for several days with books to read. There he was presented with a paper to sign: 'Counter-revolutionary conspiracy. Condemned by the Special Collegium to three years' deportation at Orenburg...'¹⁶ This was not a confession, but merely to acknowledge his charge and sentence.

¹⁵ Yevgeny Ambartsumov, "A Venomous Fog Lifts: Victims of the Moscow Trials Have Been Rehabilitated," Moscovskiye novosti, June 19, 1988, p. 10. Appeared in the English edition of Moscow News, No. 25, June 26-July 3, 1988, as "The Poisonous Mist Disperses," p. 10.

¹⁶ Memoirs, pp. 296-97.

Serge signed, angry because he had no choice, and glad to be able to look forward at least to a life in the open air.¹⁷

In an ironic post-script to Serge's interrogations, Serge ran into the mysterious 'Solovian' -- the figure his interrogator tried to link to him in some conspiracy -- while waiting to be deported. Solovian introduced himself to all and sundry with the assurance that he was not in any Opposition and supported the 'General Line.' Serge wished him luck with the General Line.¹⁸

II. 4.13 Orenburg

Serge's journey to his destination of deportation was something of a wonder, especially compared to his stay in the Lubianka. He met other Oppositionists in transit and shared news, marveling at the thrill of being outdoors and viewing the great natural beauty of Soviet towns and countryside. In his novel about the Orenburg experience, Midnight in the Century, Serge explained how Left Oppositionist ideas were carried across borders, in trains leading to deportation and prison sites.¹⁹

Orenburg sits geographically on the line between Europe and Asia, though Serge wrote that it belongs to Asia. Formerly the capital of Kazakhstan (the capital is now Alma-Ata, where Trotsky was first exiled), the "metropolis of the steppes" had flourished as a wealthy market city in former times, even as recently as NEP. When Serge arrived in June 1933 however, the town was in decline and ruin, ravaged by famine.

In place of the lively bazaars of yesterday, Orenburg now featured mostly empty State retail-trade stores. Serge reported that in his three years there, no shoes were sent to Orenburg.²⁰

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Serge, MITC, p. 102.

²⁰ Memoirs, p. 299.

Serge's conditions of deportation were that he could not leave the town, save for fresh air walks in the woods, he could work and live where he found a job and lodgings, and he was to be issued a bread-card. Serge soon joined the hungry Kirghizians and Kazakhstanis of Orenburg -- and remained hungry till his expulsion from the Soviet Union.

Orenburg was a privileged place for deportation, reserved for leading figures. One tenth of the population were deportees, or 16,000. When Serge arrived there were 15 political deportees, among them leading Mensheviks, anarchists, SRs, zionists and Oppositional capitulators.²¹ Later the Oppositionist community swelled. Serge thought the GPU had allowed a certain homogeneity of political deportees to gather together in exile so that in the course of intellectual and political discourse, differences would arise, dividing the Opposition. It would then be easier for the GPU to separate and transfer the most irreconcilable to worse climes and prisons.²²

The deportee was in a special class unto itself in the Stalinist system. While it is true that every Soviet citizen was almost entirely dependent on the State for survival, this was true to a more exaggerated degree for the deportee. First, he or she had to report constantly to the GPU, and was completely at the mercy of a few officials for such basics as mail from relatives, work, medical care, and so on. Then the interrogations were never finished either; the pressure to capitulate was incessant. The deportee could not fraternize with party members and was ostracized by the local population, who feared contact would jeopardize their own security.²³

There was also a catch as far as employment was concerned: no one would hire Serge (or any deportee) unless he proclaimed

²¹ Memoirs, p. 303.

²² Ibid.

²³ Serge, RTYA, P. 75.

support for the 'general line.'²⁴ Serge refused to capitulate, and thus got no work. He depended entirely on the mail for survival, since he could receive food parcels from his wife, and more importantly, money from the sale of his books in Paris. His first three novels, Men in Prison, Conquered City, and Birth of Our Power, as well as his history Year One of the Russian Revolution were now on sale in France. When the mail got through, Serge received 300 francs²⁵ (about 15 rubles) per month to buy food at the local Torgsin shop, which even at the height of famine sold food in exchange for foreign currency. Serge was able to support some of his comrades as well. For a while, Serge also received food parcels from Magdeleine Paz in Paris -- packages of rice, sugar, flour and olives. Vlady told Richard Greeman that he once divided a single olive among a group of schoolmates, who had never seen one.

In the winter of 1934, Serge's wife Liuba and son Vlady joined him in Orenburg, bringing with them Serge's typewriter and books. Liuba's mental health was not strong enough to bear the terrible instability of life in deportation, however, and

²⁴ If the deportee was a worker, 'responsible employment' was denied him, if he was an intellectual, he was not allowed to teach or continue his studies. Any work of adequate compensation was also forbidden. His mail was often confiscated, and in general the deportee was deprived of civil rights. He was subject to arbitrary arrest and raids, living under the constant threat of the Secret Service. Serge, RTYA, p. 75-76. The deportee was destitute, spied on, deprived of private life, and administratively transferred from one remote region to another, usually without any knowledge of charges. Conditions in deportation, however terrible, were better than prison. Many memoirs corroborate and elaborate Serge's testimony: e.g., Anton Ciliga, El Campesino, Nicholas Prychodka, Alexander Weissberg, etc. See bibliography.

²⁵ The Comité Victor-Serge in Paris raised money for Serge through the journal La Revolution Proletarienne. The subscriptions obtained were published in each issue with the name of the contributor and amount donated. See La Revolution proletarienne, "Souscription pour Victor Serge," no. 122-2, [date].

Serge finally decided that her presence would jeopardize the survival of all of them, and sent her back to Leningrad. Vlady remained with Serge throughout his period of exile, and he remembers the time as a combination of tranquility, study, and a fierce struggle to withstand starvation and exposure during the five months of harsh winter²⁶, and hunger and disease during the five months of extremely hot summer.²⁷

Apart from Vlady, Serge's 'family circle' in Orenburg consisted of ten deported Oppositionists, whose characters and travails are captured in Serge's novel of the Orenburg years, Midnight in the Century.²⁸ The men and women who shared internal exile with Serge, most of them Civil War veterans, "incarnated an epoch" and Serge wrote that "most probably"²⁹ they all perished.³⁰ They are described in detail in both the Memoirs and Russia Twenty Years After. The intensity of the experience brought these comrades very close together, and Serge strongly felt it was his duty, upon release, to ceaselessly campaign for their lives, and memorialize their struggles in his written works. The salient factor Serge was to stress, which in

²⁶ In order to keep warm, the townspeople abandoned the well-made large houses which were in any case requisitioned by the GPU. They then built smaller, inferior homes, leaving the larger ones to rot. When the condition of the larger homes reached a certain stage of deterioration, permission would be granted to demolish them and sell the timber for firewood. In this way Serge and the other inhabitants were able to keep warm, while the housing stock diminished and the population increased. See Memoirs, pp. 306-307, and Midnight in the Century.

²⁷ Information supplied by Vlady, interview in Mexico City, May 1987.

²⁸ Translated by Richard Greeman and published by Readers and Writers.

²⁹ Memoirs, p. 309.

³⁰ In Moscow in 1989 Vlady and I discovered that Lisa Senyatskaya, Vassili Pankratov's wife, had survived.

retrospect seems all the more remarkable, was that these men and women, "journeying ... from prison to prison, from exile to exile, tormented by privation, ... kept their revolutionary faith, their good spirits, their sparkling political intelligence."³¹

Serge's fiction serves to portray the struggles, hopes, goals and tragedies of his generation of revolutionaries, whose life experiences were unique. His writing is autobiographical though it is also a work of the imagination. Serge used the novel as his vehicle to get at the inner truth of the tumultuous political struggles in which he and his comrades participated. His fiction was meant to communicate that truth in a way that his histories couldn't.

For our purposes, his novel Midnight In The Century, while as a work of fiction cannot be used to verify historical detail, can be used to discover what he and his comrades were thinking, discussing and feeling. The novel reproduces many of the meetings and discussions of the Left Oppositionists in exile.³² It is a work of optimism, despite the grim conditions it

³¹ Memoirs, p. 307.

³² For example, by the river the group held discussions on the nature of the Soviet state and on Hegel and dialectics: pp. 67-71. Pp 71-72 discusses the report on the Left Oppositionists in the Verkhne-Uralsk Isolator and Central Prison in late 1933. On pp. 75-6 they discuss the situation in Germany and the need for a United Front, and the question of whether or not the time has come to form a new party in the USSR. This develops into a general theoretical discussion on the congruencies between Stalin and Hitler: "These grave-diggers were born to understand each other. Enemies and brothers. In Germany, one is burying an aborted democracy, the child of an aborted revolution. In Russia, the other is burying a victorious revolution born of a weak proletariat and left on its own by the rest of the world. both of them are leading those they serve --the bourgeoisie in Germany, the bureaucracy here at home -- toward a catastrophe." There are many more useful discussions, including very useful portrayals of the interrogations and how some Oppositionists fought back and others caved in. (pp. 41-50, 165-167, 169-171.)

describes and the implications of the title. In a central scene of the novel, the old Bolshevik Elkin and the young worker Rodion discuss the joy of sunshine -- feeling that they could be whisked into a cellar that evening. Querying what had become of thought in this period of the 'huge falsehood,' the old Bolshevik Elkin answered Rodion: "Right now it's something of a midnight sun piercing the skull. Glacial. What's to be done, if it is midnight in the century?" Characteristically, the young Rodion, Serge's hope for a socialist future, answered "Midnight's where we have to live then."³³

Even in the worst conditions, while the genuine revolutionaries were being stabbed in the back by their own Party, while fascism reared its ugly head in Europe and capitalism was in the depths of depression and approaching war, Serge's novel reaffirms the revolutionary spirit and bright political intelligence of the comrades with whom he had the privilege of rubbing shoulders. Written from 1936-1938, the novel posits the living revolutionary flame kept alive in the creative dissent of imprisoned and deported Oppositionists, about to be crushed by the totalitarian machine. Even if it is midnight in the century, the morning dawns with the escape of the young Rodion, the representative of the new revolutionary worker about to germinate a new working class with revolutionary ideas learned from the old generation of Bolsheviks in deportation.

It has been suggested that Koestler's famous novel of the purges, Darkness at Noon, was influenced by Serge's Midnight in The Century, and although the content is more frequently compared with The Case of Comrade Tulayev, the titles themselves have been the subject of an interesting analysis by Bill Marshall. While the titles seem to parallel each other, Marshall points to the subtle, if significant difference -- in Serge's novel light triumphs over dark, while Koestler's title, taken

³³ Serge, Midnight in the Century, pp. 117-118.

from Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, stresses dark obliterating light.³⁴

* * * * *

Who were these comrades? Among the well known, Boris Mikhailovich Yeltsin, the old Bolshevik comrade of Lenin, whose son Victor Borisovich (Yeltsin) was Trotsky's assistant; Lisa Senatskaya, pregnant wife of Vassili Pankratov, revolutionary leader in the Verkhne-Uralsk isolator; Lydia Svalova, young worker from Perm who had spent her youth in deportation; Fanya Epstein, Odessa intellectual and militant; Vassili Chernykh, former head of Ural Cheka, a 'revisionist' who thought all ideas now needed rethinking; the history Professor Yakov Belenky, the worker Ivan (Yakov?) Byk³⁵ who had been a member of the Workers Opposition; the proletarian from the Putilov works, Alexei Santalov, arrested for calling Stalin the "gravedigger of the Revolution" in a bar. These comrades became the composite characters of Ryzhik³⁶, Elkin, Varvara, Avelii, Kostrov and Rodion in Midnight in the Century. The novel reveals that their morale was excellent, despite the terrible conditions of deportation, that they were able to continue discussion and

³⁴ W.J. Marshall, Ideology and Literary Expression in the Works of Victor Serge, unpublished doctoral dissertation, Oxford University, 1984, pp 324-326.

³⁵ Byk had been in the Solovietzky Islands concentration camp. A Civil War veteran and former Workers' Oppositionist, he had also been one of the organizers of the famous hunger strike at the Verkhne-Uralsk prison. The strike was against the automatic doubling of sentences. While on strike Byk was informed that Rakovsky had formulated a position of united front with the Central Committee against the war danger. Byk thought this reasonable and was flown to Moscow's Butyrki prison, and was asked to sign the article of conciliation he had been told Rakovsky had written. After reading the document, Byk asked to be returned to the concentration camp.

³⁶ Vlady insists that Ryzhik represents Serge in the novels. Interviews, 1986 (Mexico), 1987 (Mexico), 1989 (Moscow).

receive information from Trotsky and the Oppositionists in the other prisons and camps, though certainly without regularity; how some held up under interrogation and others caved in; how they were all Oppositionists, but nevertheless held various positions.

On this last point, Serge was careful to show how in discussion, the Opposition maintained the revolutionary Bolshevik tradition of expressing sharp and conflicting views, in an attempt to achieve clarity. The Oppositionists were wholly different from the servile yes-men of Stalin's Party; they were thinking revolutionaries accustomed to debate. The Opposition was divided between capitulators, (in three drafts), the democratic centralists (led by V. Smirnov and T. Sapronov), revisionists, and doctrinaires, who were subdivided into orthodox, extreme Left, and State Capitalists. Ciliga³⁷ also confirmed that the Opposition had moderate and far left currents, (as did Deutscher) and Boris Yeltsin confessed that what held them together was the GPU. "Our unity is the work of the GPU: in fact we have as many tendencies as there are militants. I don't find this at all objectionable."³⁸

Where was Victor Serge in this melange of Oppositionists? He stood on the left of the Trotskyists, sympathetic to the concerns of the extreme left-wing, but loyal to the ideas of the Old Man, with the outstanding difference that Serge proclaimed

³⁷ Anton Ciliga belonged to the 'extreme Left-wing Opposition' which distinguished itself from the Trotskyists in calling the Soviet Union a new exploitative class society, as opposed to Trotsky's characterization of the USSR as a degenerated workers' state. Ciliga belonged to the camp of Oppositionists which included 'democratic Centralism', 'workers' Opposition,' 'workers group.' They shared a concern that Trotsky was battling Stalin over the Party and that the proletariat and its condition was but a passive object in the struggle. See The Russian Enigma, Anton Ciliga, especially Book III, chapter VIII, pp. 261-274.

³⁸ Memoirs, p.307.

the death of the Bolshevik Party much earlier than Trotsky.³⁹ It was easier for Serge, the former anarchist, to break with the moribund and counter-revolutionary practices of Stalin's Party than for many of the Bolshevik Party's founders and fighters. Serge, it must be remembered, favored a multi-party system as early as 1921. In 1923 he wrote that a coalition government, though fraught with danger, would be less dangerous for the Soviet and international proletariat than the one-party state dictatorship which emerged. This realization came later, if at all, to other members of the revolutionary generation of Bolsheviks.⁴⁰

II. 4.14 The Crossroads

During the terrible winter of 1934, Serge fell deathly ill due to the appalling conditions. In the country at large, the famine was ending and the ruble had stabilized, pegging it to a kilo of bread. But in deportation, Serge had no work, and the GPU cut off his mail, his only source of food. Serge thought the

³⁹ Serge never defined the class nature of the Soviet Union as State Capitalist as did many of the extreme left-wingers. His own conclusions about the class character of the Soviet State are taken up in the chapter on his final writings below.

⁴⁰ The so-called "Right" Opposition only discovered the dangers of the one-party anti-democratic system when it turned against them. In 1927, Bukharin wrote in an ironic tone: "under the dictatorship of the proletariat, two, three or four parties may exist, but on the single condition that one of them is in power and the others in prison." (Trud, Nov. 13, 1927) His fellow comrade Tomsky echoed Bukharin in the Pravda of Nov, 19, 1927. Serge commented: "the corollary of this monstrous theory is: a single opinion in the single party and it soon becomes the opinion of a single one. Tomsky, Bukharin, and their friends did not have long to wait before experiencing at their own expense the virtues of the prison state."

GPU was choking him off because of the success of the international campaign for his release, conducted from Paris. This knowledge boosted his morale, but didn't save his health. Yet Serge continued to give talks to his comrades in the surrounding woods, about the impending Spanish revolution and its impact on the West and the Soviet Union. Even the news of Rakovsky's capitulation did not dampen their morale, since they were all aware of Rakovsky's age and condition, and how the GPU had tricked him with 'secret documents' about impending war. Their comrade Ivan Byk (see fn 29 above) confirmed this.

Yet with no money and no food, Serge and Vlady nearly starved to death.⁴¹ In a conversation that took place in Mexico in May 1987, Vlady recounted his experiences in Orenburg: the worst was the isolation, he said, the horrible hunger they suffered, and having to witness children "dying like flies." Yet he remembers the wonder and tranquility, the political discussions, the freezing nights. He felt like a young monk with his father his teacher in surroundings like a spartan convent. Vlady sketched, and managed to send a picture to Trotsky. He said of Serge:

"My father was very sad, and deathly hungry, though he never lost his senses. He had a firm character and worked incessantly. Even in Orenburg he always managed to wear a clean shirt and to keep clean and dignified. I sketched, read dictionaries and studied the history of Greece and Russia. We cooked together, more often than not it was a cabbage soup made of

⁴¹ Serge and Vlady survived on a little black bread and a soup made of sorrel and one egg that had to last two days. Memoirs, p. 311.

cabbage, water and salt. We always sat down to eat, and after 'dinner' we read poetry, even my father's verses. Then my father went back to work."⁴²

Serge was plagued by boils, which began to abscess, leading to an infected tumour in his left breast. No medical treatment was allowed until the "GPU woke up, since they had to answer for us to the Central Collegium."⁴³ Serge was finally taken to hospital, probably in late December 1934, just after Kirov's assassination. Serge wondered if this hospitalization saved him from being rearrested for Kirov's assassination, as had his comrades Pevzner, Pankratov and others. However, Pevzner was every bit as ill as Serge with scarlet fever, and was taken to the same hospital. Perhaps the international attention Serge's case attracted, or some arbitrary inattention, was the reason.

Serge's description of the conditions in the hospital in Orenburg could have come right out of some medieval hell. Serge owed his survival to the GPU's allowing him to receive one dispatch, containing money from the sale of his books, with which he could buy food.

Serge received word from Pankratov, newly interned at Verkhne-Uralsk with Kamenev and Zinoviev, that the new terror was far worse than anything previous, and that Serge and his comrades should prepare themselves.⁴⁴ Both of Serge's Orenburg comrades Pankratov and Pevzner were charged with new terms of five years' imprisonment for Kirov's assassination.

The assassination took them by surprise, since Serge and his comrades were convinced just at the moment that Kirov was murdered that the situation was achieving a degree of normalization. The famine was ending, the Kolkhoz system had been modified to allow the kolkhozniki a private plot on the

⁴²Taped interview I conducted with Vlady in Mexico, May 1987.

⁴³ Memoirs, 311.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 312.

collective farm, and the Soviet Union was trying to present an improved world image in order to win a better position in the League of Nations.

Serge's perceptive powers did not fail him. The Soviet Union was at crossroads at the end of 1934. Stalin could have retreated and revived NEP in a modified form, wound down the concentration camps, increased real wages, and given the peasants more breathing space -- all of which would have immeasurably increased his popularity. Serge wrote that Bukharin's work on the Constitution seemed also to indicate that Stalin would choose that road.⁴⁵ The Oppositionists at Orenburg, having thus analyzed the situation, spent the next year (1935), while the Politburo was torn between "contrary inclinations," in illusive serenity.

II. 4.15 Underestimating the fire of the dragon

The assassination of Kirov on December 1, 1934,⁴⁶ has rightly been called the "keystone of the entire edifice of terror"⁴⁷. The assassination "ushered in an era of panic and savagery"⁴⁸ beginning with the immediate execution of 128 people, the arrest and imprisonment of the entire Zinoviev and Kamenev tendency (Serge estimated 3000 people); the mass

⁴⁵ Memoirs, p. 315.

⁴⁶ Sergei Kirov was shot in the back by a young embittered communist, Leonid Nikolayev, at the Smolny in Leningrad. When questioned by Stalin, Nikolayev pointed to the NKVD guards and confessed they "made me do it" and had given him four months of target practice. Witness Filipp Medved, head of Leningrad NKVD, told his friends in the camps about the scene of Nikolayev's questioning, in which he stressed Nikolayev's cry: "They kept at me for four months. They said it was necessary for the party." Antonov-Ovseyenko, ibid., pp. 90-93. The full story of Kirov's assassination is also recounted in Medvedev, op. cit., pp. 157-166.

⁴⁷ Robert Conquest, The Great Terror, p. 73.

⁴⁸ Serge, Memoirs, p. 313.

deportation of tens of thousands of Leningraders;⁴⁹ arrests among the deportees and secret trials within the prisons themselves. In many cases Oppositionists charged with the killing of Kirov had already been in prison two years when the assassination took place. This event became the starting point for the "great terror" discussed below. It is also the centerpiece of Serge's authentic novel of the purges and Stalinism, The Case of Comrade Tulayev, Tulayev being Serge's fictional Kirov.

The Kirov assassination has been the subject of historical controversy.⁵⁰ Although at the time, the assassination had been

⁴⁹ Serge estimated that as many as 100,000 people were deported from Leningrad to the regions of the Volga, the Urals, Central Asia and Siberia. He quoted Berger, a French technician living in Leningrad who wrote about the mass deportations in "USSR 1935," La Revolution Proletarienne, September 25, 1935. Serge confirmed that between 1200 and 1500 of the deported Leningraders came to Orenburg, among them many women, children and old folk. RTYA, pp. 200-201. Serge added in From Lenin to Stalin, p. 81, that the 100,000 Leningraders were deported in a single year, 1935, the year of economic recovery. Serge attributed this action to the bureaucracy's awareness of its unpopularity, which along with fear, dominated its actions.

⁵⁰ Alexander Orlov first implicated Stalin in his book The Secret History of Stalin's Crimes (1953) and his version was corroborated by Boris Nicolaevsky's 1956 essays, compiled in his Power and the Soviet Elite: "The Letter of an Old Bolshevik" and Other Essays (1965) Alexander Barmine concurred with Nicolaevsky and wrote that Stalin alone profited from Kirov's death. Barmine, One Who Survived, pp. 251-253. Khrushchev gave many of the facts in the 22nd Party Congress, and the story has since been confirmed and elaborated by Roy Medvedev in Let History Judge, and by Anton Antonov-Ovseyenko in The Time of Stalin. Recently the Kirov affair has generated new interest and controversy in the wake of Gorbachev's policy of glasnost: Robert Conquest's new book Stalin and the Kirov Murder (Oxford University Press, 1989) and Adam Ulam's novel The Kirov Affair. J. Arch Getty asserts that the evidence implicating Stalin in the assassination is biased and writes that Nikolayev acted possibly in concert with the police, but without the involvement of higher-ups, including Stalin, in Origins of the Great Purges. Ulam and Getty both reject the
(continued...)

blamed on the Zinoviev-Kamenev Oppositionists and the Left Oppositionists, Khrushchev's official investigation, soon suppressed, implicated Stalin. Trotsky, in exile, immediately wrote in the Bulletin of the Opposition, that the GPU was involved, and that communists of the Zinoviev, Kamenev and Trotskyist stamp rejected individual terror.⁵¹

Kirov had replaced Zinoviev as the head of the Leningrad party organization. He was widely popular, according to one writer, due to his leading the opposition to the execution of Riutin in 1932.⁵² At the 17th Party Congress in late January 1934, the so-called "Congress of Victors," there was a move to replace Stalin as General Secretary with Kirov, and in the vote

⁵⁰ (...continued)

sources implicating Stalin's role in ordering Kirov's murder. For his part, Getty restricts himself to official sources, which in the Soviet context have to be treated carefully given that the practice of falsification was institutionalized, and Getty equally rejects Memoirs as a source material, as well as personal accounts. The subject is now open in the Soviet Union with the publication of Anatoly Rybakov's Deti Arbata and the article in February 1988 Nedelya charging Genrik Yagoda as "one of the central figures in arranging the assassination of S. M. Kirov" and in December 1987's Ogonyok which published previously suppressed sections of the memoirs of Anastas I. Mikoyan, describing how Kirov almost replaced Stalin as General Secretary in 1934. Lastly, in the Soviet Union the playwright Mikhail F. Shatrov's "Onward...Onward...Onward" accuses Stalin of plotting Kirov's murder. The interest in uncovering the real facts is growing as the assassination was a turning point in Soviet history because of everything that followed from it, using that event as an arbitrary point of departure for massive repression.

The CPSU has established a Politburo Commission headed by Mikhail Solomentsev and including KGB chief V. Chebrikov, Propaganda chief A. Yakovlev and Politburo members G. Razumovsky and P. Demichev, who have created a special sub-commission to examine the Kirov case. Pravda, August 19, 1988.

⁵¹ Byulleten Oppozitsii, no. 41 (January 1935).

⁵² Boris Nicolaevsky, "The Murder of Kirov," Sotsialisticheskyy Vestnik, May, Oct. and Dec. 1956, collected in the same author's Power and The Soviet Elite, Praeger, New York, 1965, p. 71.

for the Central Committee, Stalin received fewer votes than any other candidate. Significantly, Kirov received only three votes against him, while Stalin had 292 votes cast against him.⁵³ Boris Nicolaevsky has interpreted the official documents of the Congress by what was missing: the phrase, in use since the 13th Party Congress, about the 'confirmation' by the Plenum of Stalin's appointment as General Secretary of the Central Committee. Since this formula was missing, Nicolaevsky took it to mean that Stalin ceased to be General Secretary of the Central Committee after the 17th Congress.⁵⁴

Stalin had to remove this new threat to his power. Kirov's death came in very handy for him, both in eliminating a serious rival and providing a pretext for repression against all those he saw as obstructing his policies and/or threatening his power. Nikolayev fired the shot that killed Kirov, but the NKVD allowed him access, did not obstruct him, got rid of inconvenient witnesses (e.g. Borisov), and executed Nikolayev. Stalin quickly passed a decree -- "The Law of December 1, 1934" -- which mandated that cases be concluded in not more than ten days, and that the indictment be handed over to the accused only one day before the trial.⁵⁵ No defense lawyers were allowed for the accused, and the death sentences were to be executed immediately

⁵³ Anton Antonov-Ovseyenko puts the number of votes cast against Stalin at 292, or one-fourth of the Congress delegates. The Time of Stalin: Portrait of a Tyranny, p. 80. Antonov-Ovseyenko's source was the records of the elections commission of the 17th Party Congress, which had been locked away until 1957, when a special commission of the Politburo was established after the XXth Party Congress to examine the archives. Roy Medvedev, in reporting the same incident, put the number of votes cast against Stalin at 270. Medvedev, Let History Judge, pp. 154-157.

⁵⁴ Boris Nicolaevsky, ibid., p. 92. Nicolaevsky indicated that his analysis of the 17th Party Congress was shared by Bukharin, and later by L.S. Shaumian in an article in Pravda of February 7, 1964.

⁵⁵ Medvedev, p.159-160.

after the announcement of the verdict. This modification of penal procedure on the day of the attentat was applied retroactively to 114 persons who were quickly liquidated for the crime.⁵⁶ Kirov was replaced in the Secretariat by Yezhov, and in Leningrad by Zhdanov.

Victor Serge was convinced that Nikolayev's act was "almost certainly an individual act committed by an enraged young Communist."⁵⁷ Serge's intimate association with the Leningrad Party Organization and the Leningrad Oppositionists, both Trotskyists and Zinovievists, led him to reject as impossible their role in the assassination. In fact, the only Left Oppositionist left in Leningrad in 1934 was Alexandra Bronstein, Trotsky's first wife. Serge affirmed that the Oppositionists in 1934 were still partisans of 'Soviet Reform' and "reform excluded any appeal to violence." Serge wrote that the murder confronted the Politbureau with a problem: "not only their own responsibility for the years of darkness, but also the existence of a reserve team of government in the persecuted Opposition who, for all the abuse directed so incessantly against them,

⁵⁶ Serge, RTYA, p. 197.

⁵⁷ Memoirs, p. 314. Other writers shared Serge's view that Nikolayev acted alone: Hryhory Kostyuk and Victor Kravchenko both wrote that Nikolayev was a lone assassin and that his act was not political, but the result of jealous rage. Rumor had it that Kirov had an affair with Nikolayev's wife. Kostyuk, Stalinist Rule in the Ukraine, Munich 1960. Kravchenko repeated the same love triangle murder motive, but added that students in Leningrad were filled with romantic hope that the assassination was an expression of terror by a new popular movement. The students began to disappear from his institute, and Kravchenko wrote that thousands of students were arrested and hundreds shot following the Kirov murder. Kravchenko, I Chose Freedom, pp. 168-69. As to workers' reactions, Andrew Smith wrote that in the Electrazavod factory where he worked, the news of the Kirov assassination shocked the workers, but some "smiled significantly to each other, when they were sure they were not being observed by the propagandists. ...A machine hand named Vassili even went so far as to say to me, 'It would have been much better if it had been Stalin instead of Kirov.'" Smith, I Was a Soviet Worker, p. 265.

were more popular among the informed sections of the population than the leaders of the State."⁵⁸ Clearly, Serge was implying that Nikolayev's bullet aimed at a Party leader to express outrage at Stalin's policies. Serge did not see Stalin behind Nikolayev.

In fact Serge's novel The Case of Comrade Tulayev is centered around the lone individual assassin, whose act created a vortex of repressions. The book was serialized in the provincial literary journal Ural, published in Sverdlovsk, in the first three issues of 1989. While in Moscow I was told by Sergei Zavarotnyi, an editor of Komsomolskaya Pravda, that Serge's thesis of the lone assassin played into the hands of the Stalinists, who wished to absolve Stalin of complicity in the murder. At the present writing, a commission of inquiry into this question has not yet presented its findings.

Much has been learned about the Kirov murder in the forty plus years that have passed since Nikolayev fired the fatal shot. At the time, Trotsky and the Left Opposition directed their energy to absolving the Zinovievists and themselves from blame, pointing to the incompatibility of individual acts of terror with Marxist views of historical agents for social change.⁵⁹ They were correct to do so, but given the tremendous social upheavals and political intrigues of the years 1928-1934,

⁵⁸ Serge, ibid., p. 314.

⁵⁹ Trotsky's pamphlet, "The Kirov Assassination and the Soviet Bureaucracy" (1935), his article in the Feb. 1935 Bulletin of the Opposition (No. 42), and his account in The Case of Leon Trotsky (pp. 495-498) all clear the accused and put the responsibility for the crime on the GPU, which Trotsky admitted in the last work cited, "could not have acted in so serious a matter without direct orders from Stalin." (p. 495.) Trotsky's assertion that Stalin had to have ordered the murder came out in the thirteenth session of the Dewey Hearings, April 17, 1937, during the period of the Moscow Trials and two and a half years after the Kirov murder. Two and a half years earlier, Trotsky and the oppositionists underestimated Stalin's capacity for mass political murder, whereas in April 1937, it had been amply demonstrated.

their defensiveness betrayed their weakness, and in a certain sense their lack of understanding of the hidden processes at work. They were, after all, defeated and had no access to the masses to express an alternative viewpoint, even a contradictory one. Nor were they privy to internal Party intrigues, and apparently didn't know about (or disregarded) Kirov's divergence with Stalin and his path of reconciliation and relaxation, which came to an abrupt end with his assassination. In view of this, Serge's remarks above concerning the 'reserve team' were aimed at the wrong 'reserve team.'

Trotsky smelled the hands of the GPU in the assassination, but Serge believed that the assassination was the work of "an isolated individual. At the very most the terrorist gave a few confidences to his two or three closest comrades, among whom the G.P.U. acknowledged there was an informer."⁶⁰ Both Serge and Trotsky displayed a measure of ingenuousness in relation to how far Stalin was willing to go to achieve his ends.

The profound significance of the assassination was not lost on the Oppositionists, however naive they may have been in relation to Stalin's guilt in the affair. Serge wrote that the attentat revealed an "inward-driven crisis" that showed

"the blind alley into which led the tactic of disavowal and apostasy, adopted more out of cynicism than cowardice by the oppositional elements readmitted into the party after Zinoviev and Kamenev. Revolutionary action cannot be suited to such recantations, undoubtedly dictated by a sort of Inquisition but agreed to out of sordid motives foreign to true socialist courage. Woe to those who forget that the proletariat cannot be served by cowardly manoeuvres, by abdications of conscience, by mental reservations, by capitulations and impostures.... Let us not be astonished that a youth should reach the point, in this suffocating atmosphere, of despairing of everything save his own despair. Let us not be astonished, either, that the bureaucracy should seize upon this occasion to rid itself of its hidden adversaries. The madness and the

⁶⁰ Serge, RTYA, p. 203.

cruelty which make it lose all sense of moderation are amazing as a confession of tremendous moral weakness; but the political calculations, which result in the measures taken against the Zinoviev tendency, are wretchedly, sordidly correct. Such an opportunity to bury these men will not present itself again."⁶¹

In other words, Serge credited the Stalinist bureaucracy with understanding and acting in its own self-interest. He continued by quoting Trotsky:

"If the bureaucrats, in their self-adoration, imagine that they are making history, we do not share their illusion. It is not Stalin who has created the bureaucratic apparatus, but the apparatus that has created Stalin in its own image. The replacement of Kirov by Zhdanov has changed nothing....The replacement of Stalin by some Kaganovich would produce no greater change..."⁶²

The assassination of Kirov on December 1, 1934 was the first act of the 'great terror' but it took two years to pick up steam. In the interim, the inner circles of the Party were battling the road ahead.⁶³ Serge thought the year 1935 was one in which the Politburo was "torn between contrary inclinations, towards normalization on the one hand, towards terror on the other."⁶⁴ It appeared that the stabilizing tendency would win:

⁶¹ RTYA, p. 203-4.

⁶² Leon Trotsky, "The Terrorism of Bureaucratic Self-Defence," Bulletin of the Opposition, September 1935.

⁶³ Barmine discussed the choices as between 'conciliation' and 'totalitarian counterrevolution.' He further wrote that while Stalin was destroying the ruling elite, a measure of conciliation was achieved in the country at large in the form of withdrawal of bread cards and an improved food situation. Barmine saw the Stalin cult and the improved food situation as Stalin's maneuvering for support by the 'politically unconscious masses' while he unleashed his terror. Alexander Barmine, One Who Survived, pp. 249-255.

⁶⁴ Memoirs, p. 315.

the abolition of bread-rationing was popular,⁶⁵ and Serge thought that Stalin was at a cross-roads. He could be eternally popular if he would raise real wages, end the concentration camps, give a breathing space to the peasants and pardon political opponents. Serge thought the work Bukharin was doing on the new Soviet Constitution meant that Stalin was opting for normalization.⁶⁶

Normalization in the context of 1934-35 meant a partial return to NEP. The question is whether that was still a real option, given that NEP itself had been a failure, accomplishing no measurable gains in industrialization and leading to a grain crisis in agriculture.

Stalin did not go for 'normalization' nor was he able to, as the processes set in motion by his policies of industrialization and collectivization, and the class relations these engendered, created an inexorable logic, leading to terror. In order to get the masses of workers and peasants to comply with impossible working conditions, their collective resistance had to be broken, and this was done by atomization through terror. Serge clearly couldn't yet discern the dynamic of Stalin's system, though it would all become clear in the next two hellish years.

Serge also wasn't able to follow through on some of his own keen observations. He realized that in 1934 the regime was at a crossroads, which is what he meant by "torn by contrary inclinations' and the talk of a return to normalization, or NEP.

⁶⁵ Serge also observed that the pegging of the ruble to a kilo of bread, an immense relief to the workers, had another effect: the "rebirth of Soviet trading in the form of stores opened by the state in increasing number, and an activization of the free market." Serge noted further, "Where are the mysteries of the exploitation of labour? At one stroke you perceive one of the great advantages of the bureaucratic mechanism and of managed economy: exploitation there is visible at first glance." Russia 20 Years After, p. 193.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

The murder of Kirov represented Stalin's elimination of the 'normalizing' alternative.

II. 4.16 Writings to Nowhere: Paid

Serge was unable to work in Orenburg without agreeing to the 'general line.' Nevertheless he was able to support himself and his son, and occasionally other comrades with his writings, and from the donations gathered by the Comité Victor-Serge in Paris. Serge took advantage of the relative tranquility deportation afforded (excluding the harrowing struggle to not starve or freeze to death) to write in profusion. Despite the isolation and uncertainty, Serge persevered and produced four books.

The arrangement Serge managed to make with Romain Rolland kept Serge in food. He made several copies of his manuscripts and sent them to Rolland in Paris, who then forwarded them to publishers. Rolland was not sympathetic to Serge's politics, but opposed repression in the USSR, and agreed to be the intermediary for Serge, to receive his letters and manuscripts.⁶⁷ Despite the precautions Serge took, including registering the manuscripts with the GPU and sending them by registered post, the first four packages were lost. Serge complained to the head of the secret police, who apologized and used the event to proclaim sabotage in the postal service and justify repression. Serge gave him another set of manuscripts to send to Rolland, which also went astray,⁶⁸ as did the next. The irony was that the Post Office was required to compensate Serge for each loss, and at the rate of five per month, Serge earned

⁶⁷ The arrangement was explained in a letter Magdeleine Paz wrote to Marcel Willard of the Association Juridique Internationale, 19 November 1934, published in RP p. 12-13, Nov. 1934.

⁶⁸ There is some discussion now as to whether Rolland received the manuscripts and did nothing with them, a possibility raised by Richard Greeman. Interview, May 1989.

'hundreds of rubles' or the equivalent income of a well paid technician.⁶⁹

The books Serge wrote in Orenburg included Les Hommes perdus, an autobiographical piece on the pre-war French Anarchists, a sequel to Conquered City called La Tourmente, set in the year 1920, 'the zenith of the revolution.' He also wrote a collection of poems, Resistance, and was working on Year Two of The Russian Revolution. Serge said these were the only books he ever had the time to revise and polish.⁷⁰

II. 4.17 L'Affair Victor Serge⁷¹

Serge had written letters to his friends in Paris prior to exile and from Orenburg, and these letters were published in the French journal La Revolution proletarienne. Supporters of Serge waged a campaign for his release which grew to such proportions that it became an embarrassment for both the French CP and its fellow travelers in the intellectual community, and thus for the Soviet Union itself.

The tireless work on behalf of Serge by the 'Comite Victor-Serge', and especially Magdeleine Paz, Charles Plisnier and Jacques Mesnil turned Serge's case into a *cause celebre*. Communist Party front organizations of lawyers (L'Association

⁶⁹ Serge, Memoirs, pp. 313-314.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 315.

⁷¹ The events surrounding the Victor Serge Affair and the 1935 Congress of Writers are discussed, *inter alia*, in the Memoirs, pp. 317-319, William Marshall, "Ideology and Literary Expression in the Works of Victor Serge," pp. 228-9 and twenty-six articles published in La Revolution proletarienne from 1933 to 1936. Two letters to Magdeleine Paz datelined Brussels, May 1936, were also published in 16 Fusilles, Ou va la Revolution Russe?, pp. 51-58, and Jacques Mesnil published "Pour Victor Serge" in Les Nouvelles Litteraires, 22 juillet 1933, where Magdeleine also published a response. The affair is also treated in Herbert R. Lottman, The Left Bank: Writers, Artists, and Politics from the Popular Front to the Cold War, Boston, 1982.

juridique internationale), the Socialist Lawyers Group, and writers organizations such as the prestigious Congress of Writers became involved in raising the issue of Serge's plight. Moreover, Serge's case was ideal: it was a perfect example of the choking of free thought. A writer's life was in mortal danger, as well as the lives of his immediate family, simply because he dared to exhibit an independence of thought, expressed in writing. This is the stuff human rights campaigns are made of. Paz, Mesnil, Leon Werth, Marcel Martinet, Georges Duhamel, Charles Vildrac, Maurice Parijanine, Boris Souvarine and others raised the issue constantly. Their demand was simple: Free Victor Serge! Subscriptions were pouring into the Revolution proletarienne⁷² not only from individuals, but from organizations and trade unions such as the United Teachers Federation. The appeal spread to Holland (Henriette Roland-Holst), Belgium (Charles Plisnier) and Switzerland (Fritz Brupbacher.) The French Teachers Union demanded Serge's release or some justification for his imprisonment at their annual conference: they alerted the Soviet teachers delegation to the case. The League for the Rights of Man published Magdeleine Paz's documentation, after prodigious prodding on her part (see RP). Apart from RP, the case splashed across the pages of other French journals such as L'Ecole Emancipee, Le Combat Marxiste, Les Humbles, etc.⁷³

The affair reached its zenith in the 1935 CP organized "International Congress of Writers for the Defense of Culture" sponsored officially by Andre Malraux, Andre Gide, Henri Barbusse, Victor Margueritte, Romain Rolland, Elie Faure, and Alain, noted leftists of various persuasions. The 'Comite

⁷²See for example the list of contributors in La Revolution proletarienne, 122-2. NB: The copies of RP articles I received (from the London School of Economics Library) are generally not dated, (unless there is a date on the page.)

⁷³ Memoirs, p. 317.

Victor-Serge' were there in force,⁷⁴ trying desperately to be heard,⁷⁵ to the chagrin of the prominent French intellectuals. Serge noted that Gide was particularly embarrassed and insisted the matter be heard,⁷⁶ at which point Malraux agreed to let Paz speak. She was supported by Plisnier and Henry Poulaille. A delegation of Soviet writers, including Boris Pasternak and Nikolai Tikhonov and the official journalist Mikhail Koltsov⁷⁷ and Ehrenberg and others were present. They were colleagues of Serge and knew him well. Yet only Pasternak kept in the background, while the others

"fulfilled instructions and declared without a blink that they knew nothing of the writer Victor Serge--these, my good colleagues of the Soviet Writer's Union! All they knew of was a 'Soviet citizen, a confessed counter-revolutionary, who had been a member of the conspiracy which had ended in the murder of Kirov.' "

These writers soon were repressed themselves in the years of the Great Terror of 1936-39. The appalling statement that linked Serge to Kirov's murder aroused Andre Gide who went straight to the Soviet Ambassador on behalf of Serge, to no avail.⁷⁸

⁷⁴Salvemini, Magdeleine Paz, H. Poulaille, Plisnier. (Carnets, p. 31)

⁷⁵Except Andre Breton, who "elegantly skirted" the issue. Carnets, p. 31.

⁷⁶Serge had written to Andre Gide from Orenburg in January 1935 about their shared conceptions of pluralism and freedom in literature. It was this contact that led to Gide's insistence that Paz and Plisnier were allowed to address the Congress on the Serge affair. The letter was published in Esprit, 45, (juin 1936), pp. 435-40.

⁷⁷Serge says he was a man noted for his "pliant docility." Memoirs, p. 318.

⁷⁸Gide was particularly angry at the behavior of the Soviet delegation who tried to stifle discussion of the Serge case at the Congress. William Marshall, in his doctoral
(continued...)

The event was to be a formative one for Gide, who changed his thinking about the Soviet Union as a result. The treatment of the Victor Serge affair at the Congress made it evident that the Congress was "entirely controlled, with perfect dishonesty, by the agents of the CP. He felt maneuvered with, saw the moral ugliness of it."⁷⁹ Gide later went to the Soviet Union to see if his moral reservations would be confirmed by Soviet reality.

Rolland, it appears, finally interceded on Serge's behalf when he went to the Soviet Union in 1935. He was not the first to press the Serge case in Moscow. Earlier a delegation from the organization Serge belonged to in his youth, the 'Jeunes Gardes Socialistes' of Belgium, had raised the issue in the Soviet Union and were told that Serge was in Orenburg translating and living very well.⁸⁰

As we already noted above, Rolland had no particular affinity with Serge the political man, but Serge the persecuted writer spurred Rolland to action.⁸¹ Rolland met with Stalin,

⁷⁸(...continued)

dissertation "Ideology and Literary Expression in the Works of Victor Serge," p. 228-29, noted that Mme van Rysselberghe later wrote that Gide's intervention with the Soviet Ambassador figured importantly in Serge's eventual release. M. van Rysselberghe, Les Cahiers de la petite dame 1929-1937, Cahiers Andre Gide no. 5 (Paris, Gallimard, 1974), pp. 462-471.

⁷⁹Serge, ibid (Carnets).

⁸⁰Jacques Mesnil, "Au Pays de la dictature bureaucratique: Les menteurs officiels contre Victor Serge," in La Revolution proletarienne, 5-365, 1933? and Magdeleine Paz, "L'Affair Victor Serge n'interesse pas l'Association juridique internationale," in La Revolution proletarienne, p. 12-13, 1934.

⁸¹Serge also had mixed feelings about Rolland: he detested Rolland's writings on Ghandi because they "contained the most exact, the most prophetic insights on the stifling character of dictatorship--all the while misunderstanding the terrible reality of a spontaneous revolution alive only by virtue of unceasing miracles of implacable activity." Nevertheless,
(continued...)

and simply asked that the Victor Serge affair be resolved one way or another, as it had become an impediment to the work of 'friends of the Soviet Union' in France.⁸² Andre Gide and Andre Malraux also made similar requests.

In 1988, Moscow News published an account of Rolland's meeting with Stalin:

"During the three weeks Rolland spent in the Soviet Union he met with Stalin and talked to him frankly. He expressed his concern about the repressions and tried to show how detrimental they were to the Soviet Union's prestige abroad. In reply Stalin painted a sinister picture: conspirators against Soviet power everywhere, new plots being constantly exposed... Rolland could neither disbelieve what he was told, nor suppress his doubts. The only concession he managed to get as a result of that conversation was Stalin's consent to allow the exiled French anarchist Victor Serge [sic, my emphasis] to leave the country. Rolland didn't sympathize with Serge at all, incidentally."⁸³

This article contains the first public mention of Victor Serge's name in the Soviet press in more than 50 years.

Miraculously, the Serge case was resolved. Stalin called Yagoda to find out what Serge had confessed to, and found that Serge had not confessed, and therefore had not agreed to be

⁸¹(...continued)

Serge recognized that Rolland intervened for Francesco Ghezzi in Suzdal, and "moderately for me." Carnet. Published in English as "The Tragedy of Romain Rolland, From the Diary of Victor Serge -- Part IV" in New International, May-June 1950, p. 177.

⁸²Serge wrote in the Pages of his Diary: "He came to see Stalin in '35 and asked that a period be put to "l'affaire Victor Serge," that I be either sentenced or freed. Stalin said he was "not up on the matter" and promised my liberty if it was at all possible. it was to this request in particular that I owe my life, it seems to me." Serge, New International, May-June 1950, ("The Tragedy of Romain Rolland: Pages from the Diary of Victor Serge--IV," p. 178.

⁸³Tamara Motylyova, "Romain Rolland: I am defending the USSR, not Stalin," Moscow News weekly No. 13, 1988, March 22, 1988, p. 16.

complicit in anything. Stalin assured Rolland that Serge and his family would be able to leave the Soviet Union.⁸⁴

II. 4.18 Expulsion and Theft

The GPU gave Serge orders to leave Orenburg in three days for Moscow, where he should report to the GPU and then be sent on to an unknown destination. Serge entertained the notion that this meant his first term of exile was finished and another would be added on, as was generally the case. He thought, "Je savais seulement que la deportation politique ne finissait jamais pour les convictions fermes."⁸⁵

Given the possibility of leaving the USSR, Serge had to find a place to go. His friends in the West had already taken the bureaucratic steps to obtain visas for Serge, should he be released. Finding a visa was not easy, however, and doors were closed to Serge in France, where he had been imprisoned twice, Holland, and Great Britain. Finally, the Ambassador from the country of Serge's birth, Belgium, came through with a visa for three years, and Ekaterina Peshkova, the director of the Political Red Cross, sent Serge the Belgian visa forms to fill out.

His comrades in exile, Yeltsin and Bobrov, debated the meaning of Serge's departure, certain that he would end up in some dark prison or cold deportation. Serge, however, while uncertain, had some grounds for optimism. He knew of the

⁸⁴At least according to Serge in his Memoirs, p.319. Later Trotsky and others speculated that Stalin had let Serge go only because he thought Serge could be of use to him. See Trotsky letter to Lola Estrine Dallon, April 1936, Boris Nicolaevsky Collection, Hoover Archives, and Elsa Poretsky, Our Own People, pp.245-246.

⁸⁵Serge, Memoirs d'un revolutionnaire 1901-1941, Editions du Seuil, Paris, 1951, p. 337. This particular passage is not in the English edition, which is shorter than the original by an eighth.

campaign in the West, thanks to a very brave Italian Bordighist/syndicalist, Francesco Ghezzi, who dared the GPU and travelled to Orenburg to let Serge know he should hang on, his friends and comrades in Europe were working on his behalf. Serge had also seen the photo in Pravda in 1935 of Stalin shaking hands with Romain Rolland, and told Vlady that this could mean they were saved.⁸⁶

Ghezzi's courageous act of solidarity and friendship was enormously risky: as a foreigner he was visible, and he had already been imprisoned at Suzdal, and therefore was likely to be watched. To travel by train from Moscow to Orenburg, a place of exile, was to court disaster. Once there he had to lay low, remaining in the house by day and only going out at night. Vlady and Serge were astonished by his bravery, and his 'madness' for risking so much.⁸⁷ Ghezzi disappeared in 1937.⁸⁸

⁸⁶Vlady said that his father's expression, at seeing the photo in the newspaper, remains engraved in his memory, and there was a kind of deja-vu in Brussels some months later, when Serge again read the newspaper and saw the announcement of the Moscow Trials. On both occasions, Vlady recalled, Serge uttered breathlessly: "we have been saved!" Tape-recorded interview with Vlady conducted by John Eden and Les Smith, June 3, 1989, Mexico City.

⁸⁷Taped interview with Vlady, Moscow, March 1989.

⁸⁸In March 1989 Vlady and I learned of Ghezzi's death from Irina Gogua, Serge's cousin, while in Moscow. Ghezzi died in Viatka spent, starved and wasted. The camp director at Viatka told Serge's sister-in-law Anita Russakova, who was also at Viatka, what had happened to Ghezzi. Russakova, still alive in Leningrad after 25 years in camps, was the housemaid in the camp director's house. He chose her because she was educated and spoke French. He asked her one day if she knew Ghezzi, and she said 'yes, he is a marvelous character!' The camp director then said that this 'marvelous character' just died of 'exhaustion and starvation.' Anita also recounted that in 1935, when she was in prison because of Serge, Ghezzi managed to visit her to tell her that Serge and Vlady had been deported to 'a city in the provinces' and that she should hang on because there were people who cared for her.

The day came to leave Orenburg: April 12, 1936. Despite the horrendous conditions of Serge's sojourn in this exile, he found it very difficult to leave, to break the kind of bonds that are created through solidarity in the face of repression and adversity. Serge wrote that his "heart was ravaged." In fact his own experience was the driving force for his tireless work on behalf of his imprisoned comrades once Serge was in the West. What made this particular leaving even harder was knowing that he would never see his comrades again, and not knowing what would become of himself and his family. Serge took the precaution of giving away his belongings (household goods) on the proviso that should he be sent to some other harsh clime that he could reclaim them. Serge packed his books, manuscripts and some personal memorabilia, and he and Vlady set off to Moscow, with two policemen watching them from a few seats away.

In Moscow Serge and Vlady were met by Ekaterina Pavlona Peshkova, Gorky's first wife, who was the Director of the Political Red Cross. She was a courageous woman who had founded the relief organization for political prisoners during the Red Terror. Both the Cheka and the GPU tolerated her organization and its work, because of who she was and her connections. The office of the Political Red Cross was on Kuznetski bridge, just across from GPU headquarters. Serge's reminiscence of his last day in Moscow and his encounter with Peshkova, the GPU and the bureaucratic errands to be performed in order to obtain exit permits for his manuscripts differ from Vlady's. It is worth recounting both, since every piece of information is valuable in the hunt for Serge's 'missing' manuscripts. Vlady's story is more dramatic, while Serge characteristically minimizes the personal drama but provides somewhat more information on the workings of the GPU.

Serge wrote in the Memoirs⁸⁹ that he was met by Peshkova, that he was able to reunite with his wife and meet his infant daughter Jeanine, who was born while he was in the hospital in Orenburg. He was not able to see his sister-in-law Anita Russakova and resolve the question of her lying confessions in 1933, as she had recently been arrested and exiled to Viatka for five years. Serge was certain that she had been rounded up precisely to keep them from meeting and discovering the truth.

Serge then recounted that he asked Peshkova to request a 24 hour delay in leaving, so that he could obtain an exit permit for his manuscripts from Glavlit, the Censorship office. Peshkova returned and told Serge to leave immediately as "The secret police officer just told me that you were not out of the country yet, and that he was sending Yagoda a fresh memorandum about you..."⁹⁰ Although Glavlit had authorized the exit visa for the manuscripts, Serge could not wait to pick them up, and left. The rest of his copies of the manuscripts were stolen by the GPU. This is Serge's account.

Vlady's version fills in more detail and is more dramatic. Firstly he says that he and his father were met by Peshkova and Julia, Serge's older sister who was Peshkova's friend, and who was very close to Serge. This omission in itself is quite interesting, but not uncharacteristic of Serge, whose family is scarcely mentioned in the Memoirs. Vlady remembers that

⁸⁹Serge's account of his last days in the USSR can be found on pages 321-322.

⁹⁰Ibid, p. 322.

Julia,⁹¹ a dominant personality, began to organize the day and the errands to be completed.

Julia and Peshkova were close friends, a fact Serge confirms in his Carnets⁹². Peshkova could perform her work because she was Gorky's wife, and had won the confidence of Lenin. Julia was protected because she was very friendly with Stalin's wife, Nadezhda Alliluyeva,⁹³ and perhaps because she herself was the object of Stalin's affection back in Baku in 1902.⁹⁴

These two women met Serge and Vlady and were preoccupied with the task ahead. Serge had an order to present himself to the GPU in Moscow, and Julia and Ekaterina wanted at all costs to avoid this meeting. They were worried that should Serge be obliged to speak, he would speak honestly about his political

⁹¹Serge finally mentions 'Julie' in connection with Peshkova in the "Pages of his Diary," Part III, New International, March-April 1950 in the section "In a Time of Duplicity" p. 119. In fact what Serge said is quite misleading -- he mentions Julie and Ekaterina as old friends of Gorky. That's correct, but Peshkova was also Gorky's wife! As to Julie, or Julia, according to Vlady she was Serge's half-sister, or perhaps his first cousin. Irina Gogua spoke of Julia: she was Serge's older sister from his mother, Paderewski. The Paderewski family were Polish aristocracy, or gentry as Serge put it, from Nizhni-Novgorod. Serge's mother Vera Paderewski was married in Petersburg and abandoned her family to study in Geneva. In Carnets, p. 25, Serge wrote of a sister named Vera Vladimirovna Frolova: Either that is Julia, or another sister. Julia went to Paris in 1910 to meet Serge, who was already translating Russian writers. When she returned she told Irina that Serge's spoken Russian was poor! Conversation with Vlady and Irina Gogua, March 10, 1989, Moscow.

⁹²"In a Time of Duplicity," in the selections from Serge's Carnets published in New International, March-April 1950, p. 119.

⁹³Interview with Vlady, March 1989.

⁹⁴According to her cousin Irina Gogua. Interview, March 10, 1989, Moscow.

analysis, and would very likely not be allowed to leave GPU headquarters.

But how could Serge miss this meeting and still comply with his expulsion order? They had his passport, his suitcases, and his visa ready. They knew that if Serge went to the GPU all would be lost. The two women cooked up a plan. Peshkova called the GPU on the telephone. With Julia listening next to Peshkova as she spoke, and Vlady and Serge listening on the extension earpiece, Ekaterina Peshkova spoke directly to Yagoda, the head of the NKVD. Peshkova said, "Genrikh, Victor Lvovich's wife is having a nervous crisis, so Victor Lvovich wants permission to spend the night here in Moscow and leave tomorrow." Yagoda answered, "Tell Victor Lvovich to leave immediately! But immediately! (nemyedlenno!)" It was an order. They hung up, and Peshkova said, "well, you don't have to present yourself to the GPU. If you are asked, say that Yagoda gave you an order to leave immediately."

Before going to the Russakov's apartment where Serge and Vlady were reunited with Liuba and met Serge's infant daughter Jeanine, Serge and Vlady had time to go to Glavlit, and to try to sell some of Serge's expensive books.⁹⁵ Without mentioning the uniquely Soviet situation of having an exit visa for the person but not his works, Vlady recalls the trip to the censorship office (Glavlit) where Serge took his manuscripts to be censored so they could be taken with him out of the country. The woman they encountered at Glavlit took the manuscripts and

⁹⁵I have left out the encounter Serge and Vlady had with Dr. Nikolayenko in the bookstore, an old anarchist who had travelled to Russia from France with Serge in 1919. Since then he had survived by living far from the capital, and occasionally visited the Serge family, bringing exquisite animal skins and other treasures to Liuba from his geographical expeditions. Vlady remembers this encounter as the big episode of the day. Since Serge had been unable to sell his valuable books he had saved for 20 years, he was able to present his old friend with a gift, a remembrance.

didn't give them back. Serge had seen her before various times, and Vlady also remembered her: her name was Zvyeryeva and she appears in several of the novels. In Serge's The Case of Comrade Tulayev she was the GPU examiner in charge of Ryzhik,⁹⁶ the character representing Serge himself. Vlady interjected that in Russian her name comes from Zvernii, which means 'beastly, brutal, atrocious.' When she took the manuscripts from Serge, she said, "huh! Viktor Lvovich, so you're leaving --in order to betray, ... you are betraying us!" Serge answered, "I don't know who is betraying, I do not believe it is me. I am continuing. One should know who is betraying. Good-bye. I hope all goes well with you." Vlady never forgot this acrimonious meeting, and Zvyeryeva's bitterness.

Serge was given a receipt for the completed manuscript copies of his Les Hommes Perdus, La Tourmente, Resistance, and L'An II de la Revolution russe, and told to come back the next day. The receipt is still in Vlady's possession.

Then according to Vlady, Serge entrusted to Peshkova copies of his manuscripts, documents, notes, photographs and memorabilia so that she could pick up the exit visa and send them on to Serge.

That evening Serge and his family met at the station to say their good-byes and leave the Soviet Union. Liuba's mother (Vlady's grandmother Russakova) and Francesco Ghezzi were both there. Vlady remembers the tearful farewell:

"My grandmother was crying, my mother was in a crisis. My baby sister, swaddled in my mother's yellow and green sweater, was in my mother's arms. It was April 14, 1936, -- springtime. Ghezzi accompanied us to the station and our last intimate words were

⁹⁶ Zvyeryeva appears in both Conquered City pp. 103-105, and The Case of Comrade Tulayev, Penguin Books Ltd, London, 1968 edition, pp. 245-246. Vlady remembered seeing her various times in his childhood, and said she was just like the novelistic Zvyeryeva who judged Ryzhik in The Case of Comrade Tulayev.

with this dear friend. He asked us to do everything to get him out, once we were in the West."⁹⁷

What is missing in both Serge's and Vlady's accounts, but what I have pieced together from various sources⁹⁸ and simple deduction, is the following: Serge had multiple copies of the work he had completed in Orenburg. He had at least 8 copies of Les Hommes perdus, at least five copies of La Tourmente, and unknown quantities of the historical L'An II de la Revolution russe and the poetry collection Resistance. Serge deposited the manuscript copies with 1) The Censor of the People's Commissariat for Public Education, 2) the Assistant Director of the Foreign Literature Section of Glavlit: 3) the Political Red Cross Director, Ekaterina Pavlona Peshkova, and 4) Francesco Ghezzi. 5) Serge had sent three copies of the novel about the French anarchist movement to Romain Rolland, and all had been seized in the post and Serge was compensated for their loss,⁹⁹ and 6) Serge kept the other copies to take with him out of the country. They were stolen by the GPU at the station in Negoreloye.

The final episode in Serge's sojourn of 17 years in the Soviet "victorious revolution" is perhaps the most dramatic. At the last station on the Soviet frontier, Negoreloye, Serge and his family were made to disembark for a final 'search.' Liuba and baby Jeanine (14 months old) were led off in one direction, Serge and Vlady in another. They were ordered to undress for a

⁹⁷As told to John Eden and Les Smith, Mexico City, June 3, 1989.

⁹⁸Serge's writings, Richard Greeman's unpublished paper "Liberation," and Vlady's recollection.

⁹⁹The official permission order to send these copies to Rolland was signed by Bogrov, head of the Foreign Literature Section of Glavlit, and is recorded in Bogrov's registered letter of Sept. 29, 1934, #949. See Richard Greeman, "Liberation," unpublished manuscript, p. 6fn. Serge corroborated the above in a statement of June 9, 1936, held in the Mexico archive.

strip search. Vlady recalled that he was still in his underwear, with his trousers around his boots. The GPU agent prodded him to hurry and asked what was he was hiding in his socks? Vlady retorted, "a submarine!" At that moment the whistle blew and the train started to pull away from the station. Serge and Vlady broke into a run, pulling their clothes up at the same time. They couldn't see Liuba and Jeanine, and Serge was horrified, thinking they would be left behind. Vlady jumped on the train and caught sight of his mother and sister. Serge was screaming "Mama, mama, I won't leave without you!" and Vlady shouted to him, "they're here, see for yourself!" Just before it was too late, Serge saw Liuba and jumped on the moving train. He looked back and saw the GPU agents pointing to Serge's suitcases, containing his manuscripts, photos, and personal belongings. Gone forever. Stolen by the GPU?

When the train passed the Soviet border, Vlady remembers his father going into the corridor and sighing with relief. Then he was tranquil.

Was this final humiliation simply harassment, a memento of his years in the USSR, or had an elaborate trap been prepared? If the latter, were these same manuscripts which were sent on three occasions to Romain Rolland, though never received, part of the scheme? Richard Greeman believes that the GPU deliberately stole the manuscripts while appearing to have let them go (the exit visa was issued, after all) in order to prevent any future protest over them.¹⁰⁰ I concur. Thus, the bureaucratic state could declare it had complied, that the loss of the manuscripts was inexplicable, or even unavoidable, but they had fulfilled their obligations, and even compensated Serge for those lost in the post.

II. 4.18 The Hunt for the Missing Manuscripts

¹⁰⁰Greeman, "Liberation," unpublished paper, pp. 7-8.

Serge was permitted to leave, but not his writings. We are still trying to find them. Once in Belgium, Serge received a letter from Peshkova, in mid-May 1936, stating that permission to send the manuscripts had been granted, but she was awaiting formal authorization.

Andre Gide went to the Soviet Union in 1936. Prior to his departure, Serge wrote him an open letter, published in La Revolution proletarienne¹⁰¹ in which he thanked Gide for his role in the International Congress of Writers on Serge's behalf. He then wrote of the actual conditions in the Soviet Union and implored Gide to keep his eyes wide open while there. Magdeleine Paz, who was very impressed with the letter, nonetheless felt it was a mistake to publish it openly, since it seemed "like an ultimatum."¹⁰² Serge said he had too much regard for Gide not to publish it. Upon his return, Gide told Serge he had tried to save his manuscripts, but saw that it was futile.¹⁰³

Since 1936 there have been several efforts to retrieve the manuscripts. Of the four, Serge was only able to reproduce the collection of poems which he had committed to memory. They were published in 1938 by Cahiers les Humbles.¹⁰⁴ The novels and the history remain 'lost'. In 1945-46 George Orwell tried to find an English publisher for Serge's Memoirs and expressed interest in the missing manuscripts.¹⁰⁵ In 1972 the French publisher

¹⁰¹"Lettre a Andre Gide," Bruxelles, mai 1936, La Revolution proletarienne, 13-157, 14-158.

¹⁰²Serge, Carnets, p. 21.

¹⁰³Ibid.

¹⁰⁴The first English translation of Serge's poems, Resistance was just published by City Lights Books, translated by James Brook.

¹⁰⁵George Orwell to Dwight MacDonald, 4.4.45, and 14 Feb. 1946. Thanks to David Cotterill for sending me these letters.

Francois Maspero wrote to Brezhnev respectfully requesting that Serge's papers be returned to his family. The letter was never answered.

In Oct. 1986 I began a letter writing campaign to attempt anew to retrieve the papers. The time was right. Mikhail Gorbachev was in power and his policy of openness or 'glasnost' had as a specific plank the reexamination of the hidden history of the USSR. Gorbachev himself declared there should be no blank pages in Soviet history. I wrote to Gorbachev, interviewed Andrei Vosnessensky in March 1987 (who professed ignorance of Victor Serge and yet had spent a night at Vlady's in Mexico during which they stayed up reading The Case of Comrade Tulayev aloud in Russian), Yevgeny Yevtushenko in April 1987, to whom I gave copies of Serge's novels and asked for help. I also interviewed Vladimir Karpov, the head of the Soviet Union of Writers and a man close to Gorbachev, Georgii Andzhaparidze, the director of the Publishing house of Foreign Literature (Khudozhestvennaya Literatura). I gave Karpov a copy of Midnight in the Century and the letter sent to Gorbachev. He personally expressed great interest for several reasons: he was born in Orenburg and had never heard of Serge; he knew I had asked Yevtushenko for help and apparently wanted to 'one-up' him, or so his translator told me.

Yevtushenko was the first to answer my request. In a letter of 18 June 1987 he told me a new organization had been set up to deal with hidden and lost treasures of the Stalin period. The Soviet foundation of Culture was this new organization and it was headed by Georg Myasnikov. I wrote to Myasnikov right away and again on June 26, 1988. I was finally answered by V. Aksyonov on 22 September 1988. Encouraged, I quickly rewrote others including Yuri Afanasiev, Yuri Kuriakin (Vlady gave him my letter, which is appended) V. Bondarenko, Ogonek, Moscow News Editor Yegor Yakovlev, film director Alexei German. Everyone seemed interested, and ignorant of Serge. It was time to go to the Soviet Union and press the case.

In March 1989 I went to Moscow, joined by Vlady Kibalchich. We succeeded in 'planting the seeds' to generate interest in Victor Serge among writers, filmmakers, activists and historians. We met Sergei Zavarotnyi, an assistant editor of Komsomolskaya Pravda who is the Soviet Sergian if such exists. Sergei Zavarotnyi had published an article about Serge and Vlady in Komsomolskaya Pravda in November 1988 and wrote a large article to be published in "Almanac Parus" in 1990. Through his article he came into contact with Irina Gogua and through her, Anita Russakova. Vlady, Sergei and I tried to map the trail of lost manuscripts. With Ghezzi's death, we could only look to Glavlit/the KGB or Peshkova's papers. We began with the latter.

When Peshkova died, her personal papers became a part of the Gorky Museum in Moscow. Her granddaughter Marfa Peshkova is the curator of the Gorky archive in the Gorky museum. We were not able to see her, but found out that soon after Peshkova's papers were deposited in the museum, the Central Committee sent someone to look through them. He removed a large portion of the papers. Another archivist at the museum remembered seeing "papers written in French."¹⁰⁶ As we left the Soviet Union, Zavarotnyi planned a trip to Orenburg to continue the search.¹⁰⁷

II. 4.19 Postscript, 1991: More News of the Manuscript Hunt

In the aftermath of my trip with Vlady to find the missing manuscripts, Sergei Zavarotnyi found out that Oppositionist Vassili Pankratov's wife Lisa Senatskaya was still alive, and her grandson of the same name, Vassili Pankratov, wanted to help

¹⁰⁶Telephone conversation between Vlady and archivist, Moscow, March 1989.

¹⁰⁷Later, Sergei Zavarotnyi met Lisa Senyatskaya and her grandson, Vassili Pankratov (named for his grandfather.) Vassili Pankratov has agreed to continue knocking on doors from within the Soviet Union, while the Victor Serge Association (I am the US representative) makes as much noise from abroad to continue the campaign.

find the manuscripts. At the same time, I passed on the information about the search to an English film maker, Jon Eden, who went to the Soviet Union and made a trip to Orenburg with Sergei Zavarotnyi. They did not turn up any leads, but Sergei's newspaper, Komsomolskaya Pravda was persuaded to fund Vassili Pankratov, so that he might investigate systematically. Young Pankratov knew Marfa Peshkova personally and was led to the closed archive of Ekaterina Peshkova's Political Red Cross. He did not find the manuscripts, but did turn up a letter Serge wrote to Peshkova from Warsaw, dated 16 April 1936, and Peshkova's letter to the NKVD¹⁰⁸ requesting the return of the manuscripts and permission to despatch them abroad. The search continues....

¹⁰⁸Both letters were printed in the Victor Serge Centenary Group Newsletter, January 1991, p. 9. See also Murray Armstrong, "The Searchers," The Guardian Weekly, Saturday-Sunday, Sept. 22-23, 1990, for an account of the search.

II. 4.20 Appendix

Appended is a copy of the letter sent in search of Serge's stolen manuscripts.

4454 Van Noord Ave.
Studio City, Ca. 91604
26 June 1988

Georg Myasnikov
Vice-President,
Soviet Fund of Culture
USSR
Moscow 121835
Arbat 35

Dear Georg V. Myasnikov,

Please forgive me for writing in English. Yevgeny Yevtushenko kindly sent me your address and told me to write you. First, please let me tell you how excited I am by your work. You are on the cutting edge of 'glasnost' and your work is greatly appreciated.

I particularly am interested in the attempts to come to terms with the periods in Soviet history which have been 'forbidden' until recently. In this respect I would like to ask your help in deepening our understanding of that period of Soviet history.

I am working on a book on Victor Serge, born Victor Lvovich Kibalchich. Serge is known in the West principally as a revolutionary French novelist. Serge wrote more than 40 books, which include 7 novels, 2 volumes of poetry, three novellas and a collection of short stories, and more than 30 works of history and politics, hundreds of articles and essays on diverse themes, biographies of Lenin, Stalin, and Trotsky, a diary, his own Memoirs, and translations of the works of Lenin, Trotsky, Zinoviev, Figner, Gladkov, Mayakovsky and various others. His Memoirs of a Revolutionary is particularly well known, as is his history, Year One of the Russian Revolution, and his novel of the purges, The Case Of Comrade Tulayev.

As I am sure you know, Serge was the son of exiled Russian revolutionary populists of the group Narodnaya Volya, who was raised in Belgium and France. Serge entered revolutionary Russia in February 1919, as the result of a prisoner exchange in which captured French officers were exchanged for a group of suspected Bolsheviks held in a French concentration camp during the First World War. Serge entered Russia with thirteen years of political activity behind him, more than six of them in captivity. Serge joined the Bolshevik Party, fought in the Civil War, and worked with Zinoviev on the Executive Committee of the Communist International. Serge was a Commissar in charge of the archives of the Okhrana, out of which came the book What Every Revolutionary Should Know About State Repression. Serge translated the works of Lenin, Trotsky, Zinoviev and others into

French, was the editor of the French edition of Inprecor, and wrote most of his articles using the name R. Albert. He joined the Left Opposition in 1923 while on assignment in Germany. He was arrested in 1928 and released, but rearrested in 1933.

When Victor Serge was expelled from the Soviet Union in April 1936, he was deprived of his suitcase filled with manuscripts he had written in deportation in Orenburg. (He spent the years 1933-36 in Orenburg, accompanied by his young son Vlady who is now a famous painter living in Mexico.) These manuscripts included the novel Les Hommes perdus, an autobiographical account of the French anarchist movement around 1910-1913; La Tourmente, a novel painting an epic picture of the Russian revolution in 1920 and a sequel to his novel published in the West, Conquered City; a collection of poems entitled Resistance, which he reconstructed from memory once in Europe; and his history of War Communism, L'An II de la Revolution russe, an unfinished work. He had multiple copies¹⁰⁹ of the four books he had written, which were deposited with various agencies: 1) the Censor of the People's Commissariat for Public Education, 2) the Assistant director of the Foreign Literature Section of Glavlit; 3) the Political Red Cross Directress, Ekaterina Poblona Peshkova, Gorky's first wife, 4) with the Italian syndicalist Francesco Ghezzi, in the Soviet Union since 1921, 5) three copies of the novel about the French anarchist movement had been sent to Romain Rolland in France and had all been seized in the post -- Serge was compensated for their loss; 6) Serge kept the other copies to take with him, which were stolen by the GPU at the station in Negoreloye.

Peshkova wrote to Serge in May of 1936 in Belgium stating that permission to send the manuscripts had been granted (they had an 'exit visa') but formal authorization for actually posting them to Serge never came through.

Vlady, Serge's surviving son, has attempted to retrieve the manuscripts with no luck. Francois Maspero, the French left-wing publisher, wrote to Brezhnev in 1972 requesting that Serge's

papers be released to his family: his letter was never answered.

If these lost manuscripts do exist, they will enrich our understanding of the early history of the Soviet Union, as well as the pre-war French anarchist movement. They will also add to our perception of Victor Serge the writer and activist. Finally, Serge's novels are the work of an extremely sensitive and politically astute eyewitness and participant of the Russian revolution and Bolshevik movement; their effect, as lessons in politics and history cannot be overstated.

¹⁰⁹ 8 copies of the French novel, 5 of the Russian novel.

Gorbachev has stated that there should be "no blank pages in the history of the Soviet Union." Many historians, journalists and magazine editors today in the USSR are doing superlative work in uncovering the 'blank spots' of Soviet history, and are to be commended. With every new story from the forbidden years, I am filled with enthusiasm and excitement! These lost manuscripts of Victor Serge's are part of the blank pages. If you can help in any way -- to make enquiries as to the survival of these manuscripts, to do anything to help return them to Serge's family -- it will be a great service to history, to scholarship, and to the Russian revolution. Please help. Thank you.

Yours,

Suzi Weissman

Similar letters sent to: Mikhail Gorbachev, Yevgeny Yevtushenko, Yuri Afanasiev, Ogonyek, Yuri Kariakin, Vladimir Karpov, Yegor Yakovlev, Moscow News, Sergei Zavarotnyi, Alexei German, V. Bondarenko.

ГЛАВНОЕ УПРАВЛЕНИЕ ПО ДЕЛАМ ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ И ИЗДАТЕЛЬСТВ (ГЛАВЛИТ)

Гр. СЕКТОР-СЕРЛ.

№ 949 29/2 1949

г. Оренбург, Коммунальная, 33.

Ваша рукопись "Les Hommes perdus" и послания Ваши 2/X Главлитом получены.

Против отправки упомянутой рукописи за границу, издатель Роман Родлену, возражений нет.

Изюм от не пересылки рукописей за границу Главлит на себя не берет. Просим поручить кому нибудь от Вашего имени войти в Сектор Иностранной Литературы Главлита (приемные часы: с 2 до 3 1/2) за получением рукописи и оформлением разрешения на отправку ее за границу.

Сектор Иностранной Литературы *Родлен* / КОГРОМ

В.И. КИДЬЧЕНКО

В ответ на Ваше письмо от 11 мая с/г сообщим Вам, что рукописи, присланные Вами 2-х романов просмотрены и будут возвращены Вам, когда будет готово разрешение на право высылки их / исключительно через границу / что касается заграничных на пограничной территории Ваших рукописей, фотографий и пр., то прилагаю или копии или точные копии, которые были Вам вручены на границе, и доверенность на получение рукописей после их просмотра.

Сестры Ваши меня находят в г. Кирове и уже продолжают там на работу.

Ев. Пешкова



22-23 Sept. 1990

The searchers

► publisher François Maspéro wrote to Leonid Brezhnev "respectfully requesting" that the papers be returned. His letter was never answered.

TODAY'S search for the missing manuscripts begins in Mexico with a Russian journalist and a local, strangely dressed painter. Sergei Zavarotnyi was the Mexico correspondent for Komsomolskaya Pravda, the Russian CP's youth paper.

"In the time of perestroika," he recalls, "our embassy was inviting more and more Russians and people of Russian origin in Mexico — and there are a lot of them. Once, Vlady came; he was dressed like a Russian, you know the style, Russian shirts, and he looked like an old fashioned Russian man. Of course I was interested in him. Someone told me he was a Mexican painter of Russian origin."

It turned out that this painter was called Vladimir Kibalchich, son of Victor Kibalchich alias Victor Serge.

"Later, I made friends with Vlady," Zavarotnyi remembers, "visiting his house, speaking about Mexico, his paintings, about Russia — and his father, of course. Here I began to understand the tragedy of Victor Serge and for me, as a journalist, it was impossible to neglect this."

So Zavarotnyi found out all that he could, wrote a piece for his paper and filed it to Moscow. Then the phone calls came. "They asked me 'who was Victor Serge because nobody knows'. His books were never published, his name was never mentioned; as if he didn't exist at all, as if he wasn't born. You know what a lot of people had the same misfortune."

Nevertheless the article was published, and then came more phone calls and letters — but this was of a different sort. The first was from Irina Gogua, a cousin of Sergei. Irina was first of all very glad to know that Vlady is alive, that he has a good and interesting life in Mexico, and that Victor Serge didn't die in any camp."

Then more calls from family friends, acquaintances and distant relatives. Information mounted. Zavarotnyi went home to Russia on holiday and picked up Irina. By this time he had read Sergei's Memoirs and he asked her about others mentioned in the book.

He remembered Lisa Senatskaya, a friend of Sergei's in exile in Orenburg, who was also married to his opposition-comrade Vassili Pankratov. "She told me that she is still alive — the wife of Vassili Pankratov, who was a...

Chekal!" Irina gave him the address and telephone number of Lisa and of Ada Voitlovskaya, wife of N.I. Karpov, another Bolshevik oppositionist.

Unsure of what to do next, Zavarotnyi filed away his new knowledge, waiting for the right time to go into print again. Then it happened. American Suzi Weissman, who had also met Vlady in Mexico, arrived at the Komsomolskaya Pravda office — with Vlady. The three attended the first public meeting for the reinstatement of Trotsky. "It was the peak of perestroika," says Zavarotnyi. "We were tasting the freedom, the right to write without fear, and it was like the taste of alcohol."

Suzi Weissman passed on information to John Eden, an English film producer with a personal interest in Sergei who had already raised development cash from Channel 4 for the TV movie to celebrate the centenary of Sergei's birth.

"In a short time two men came to me," continues Zavarotnyi, "energetic and with large quantities of whisky and with gigantic plans to make the film and gather material." The three travelled around Russia to meet those who knew the Sergei family and, in Leningrad, met another Vassili Pankratov — grandson of the old Bolshevik.

Vassili Pankratov is a 27-year-old physicist from Leningrad. He had heard of Victor Serge from his grandmother, Lisa. Sergei's novel, The Case Of Comrade Tulayev, was published for the first time in Russia last spring in small-circulation magazine called Ural.

"When this novel appeared in Ural," says Pankratov, "my grandmother came to me and told me that she knew the author. She told me the story of Orenburg, and how they were close friends with Victor Serge, and about Romain Rolland, who came to the Soviet Union and asked Stalin to set him free."

Then the English filmmakers arrived in Leningrad with Sergei Zavarotnyi. Pankratov's involvement in the project was now imminent: "My grandmother called me and told me — very excitedly — that two English producers were coming to ask her about her past, about grandfather, everything. Of course it was great for her. I decided to come and listen, and so..."

And so Vassili Pankratov met Sergei Zavarotnyi. "And we agreed," says Zavarotnyi, "that our paper will cover my expenses... and that we would set up a fund to pay Vassili for research in his free time."

Zavarotnyi knew someone called Maria Peshkova, who is the curator of the Gorky Archive in the Gorky Museum in Moscow. She is the grand daughter of Ekaterina, who ran the

► Continued from page 20

Political Red Cross. Pankratov made his first contact there. No manuscripts were found but he did discover letters from Romain Rolland to Maxim Gorky concerning the campaign to release Sergei. These are shortly to be published.

Pankratov's search next led to the Central Archive of Literature and Art where the director, Natalia Volkova, led him to files held in Sergei's family name, Kibalchich, where he found a few letters but no clue to the manuscripts.

Next stop was the Institute of World Literature, where the Peshkova files are held. Nothing. Then, after a few days, says Pankratov, "the director told me there is a second part of Peshkova's archives, a part which deals with her work in the Red Cross. He told me that these documents were held somewhere in secret in the KGB, but he now has information that these archives were — not long ago, maybe a month ago —



THEN AND NOW: The house at 88 Cavsky Street, Orenburg, (above) drawn by Sergei's son, Vlady in his teens and (right) as it is today. PHOTOGRAPHS: JOHN EDEN

transferred to the Central Archives of the October Revolution."

Pankratov obtained permission to open the Red Cross files and found two letters: one from Sergei to Peshkova explaining what happened on the train, and another from Peshkova to the KGB asking that the copies he left with the censor be sent on to him. "I asked her (the director) where she thought the

manuscripts could be, and she said she thought all of them, all the copies, were in one place somewhere in the KGB archives. She thought Peshkova gave them to the KGB because they were too dangerous to keep. If they were found the whole Red Cross would be in danger."

Sergei Zavarotnyi intervened at this point and wrote, on his paper's headed

notepaper, to the deputy head of the KGB, V. Pirozhkov. "We got an answer after about two months," said Zavarotnyi, "saying they had made a thorough search and had found nothing."

But Zavarotnyi is not convinced, nor is he finished. "Maybe another place we didn't cover well is Leningrad. He was arrested there, he lived there. Maybe we can find some mention of Victor Serge there and maybe his case is there."

And Pankratov is following the same trail. He was advised to go to Pushkin House, Leningrad. "This is the archive for nineteenth century writers but the documents of immigrant writers were also sent there. I'll go to Pushkin House in October. Another track is back to the Central Archives of Literature and Art. [I have been told] there is a special closed department connected with immigrant writers there too. The director didn't say a word about it to me. Maybe it is closed and maybe it is open. I will try to get permission."

And what pushes Pankratov on in his literary sleuthing? "No matter where your sympathies lie — to socialism or not — it is a fact that just after 1917 tragedy came and Victor Serge thought the same because he saw the evil, the black side of the revolution. All the documents of this terrible period must be known."

And Zavarotnyi has clearly got his teeth into a good story. "We'll write a letter to the chief of Leningrad's KGB and Vassili can look there. It's a long road of course, but in any case we're coming near the real truth of what has happened to the manuscripts: were they destroyed and if so was it on purpose or by chance?"

The Victor Serge Centenary Group is at 120 Amhurst Road, London E8 2AG.

IT'S A LIVING

Filling BR sandwiches



ON THE TRAIL: Pankratov (above) and Zavarotnyi, whose paper is backing the Sergei project.



V. Another Exile and Two More: the Final Years

5.1 Introduction

"Row, Vassili, row. Let's pull together
we are brothers
in defeat and hard times--
our defeat is prouder and greater
than their lying victory ...
It's good to go up the rivers
as long as your back's not broken ...
We'll hold on as long as we can."¹

* * * * *

"O rain of stars in the darkness,
constellation of dead brothers!

I owe you my blackest silence,
my resolve, my indulgence
for all these empty-seeming days,
and whatever is left me of pride
for a blaze in the desert.

But let there be silence
on these lofty figureheads!
The ardent voyage continues,
the course is set on hope.

When will it be your turn, when mine?

The course is set on hope."²

¹Excerpted from "Boat on the Ural River," a poem Serge wrote in Orenburg on May 20, 1935 about a boat ride that he took with five other deported communists. It is from the collection Resistance, (pp. 25-27), poems by Victor Serge written in Orenburg, confiscated by the GPU and reconstructed from memory in the West. First published in 1938 by Cahiers Les Humbles, and translated into English by James Brooks, published by City Lights Books, San Francisco, 1989.

²Excerpted from Serge's 1935 poem, "Constellation of Dead Brothers," Orenburg, published in Resistance, pp. 34-35.

These poems, written in Orenburg speak to the state of mind of the defeated oppositionists, who notwithstanding unspeakable suffering and betrayal, managed to retain their socialist optimism for the future. This was not a religious conviction, but a Marxist one, based on the certainty that future progress belonged to the working class, despite fascism, despite Stalinism. In a real sense they serve to introduce this last chapter on Serge's political voyage, which brought him face to face with fascism, Stalinism in the USSR and abroad, war, political isolation and defeats. In the last part of this period, when Serge was exiled to Mexico, he began a period of intense writing and reflection. Cut off from his friends, comrades, language and politics, his writings reflect his deepest thoughts about the fate of socialism in the wake of Stalin's crimes in its name.

His political cohorts in the Fourth International also rejected Serge³ in this final exile, due more to the efforts of the GPU than to real political differences. Although there were some political differences, others were invented, and we will seek to refute the charge often leveled against Serge by both Trotskyists and social democrats that Serge had abandoned Marxism and had become a professional anti-Stalinist a la New Leader, the American right-Menshevik paper that frequently

³For example, see inter alia, Leon Trotsky, "Victor Serge and the Fourth International, Dec. 2, 1938," "Intellectual Ex-Radicals and World Reaction, Feb. 17, 1939." Pierre Frank, Introduction to Kronstadt by Lenin and Trotsky, Monad Press 1979, and in the revue Quatrieme Internationale, Nov-Dec. 1947, Paris, an obit for Serge stated: "Serge soutint la politique centriste on regrettera que ce militant revolutionnaire....degage de son experience personnell du stalinisme, certes cruelle et deprimante, que des doutes sans fondements serieux sur le marxisme revolutionnaire." Trotsky himself told James Cannon in a letter of 24 Dec. 1937, ["Les 'lecons d'Espagne' et le Menchevisme dans les rangs des Partisans de la IV Internationale"] that Serge held absolute menshevik ideas on Spain. ['idees absolument mencheviques.'] I found this letter in the Serge archives in Mexico; it was not printed in the English edition of Trotsky's Writings.

carried Serge's byline. As Serge wrote in a letter to Hryhory Kostiuk in his final month of life:

"Ya ostaius -- neopokolebimo -- sotsialistom, storonnikom demokraticeskogo sotsializma. Sistemu protiv kotorii ya borolsya i boriu -- i kot. [sic] vui znaete po opyitu, -- ya rassmatrivayu kak raznovidnost totalitarizma t.d. nechto novoe, po krainie beschelovechnoe i antisotsialisticheskoe."

Serge's numerous essays from his final exile address his mature thinking about socialism, anarchism, the political economy and social structure of the USSR and its impact on the international political struggle, his understanding of WWII and its aftermath, the new cold war and the nuclear age, the role of the vanguard party, and broader questions of art, anthropology, psychology, philosophy, and politics.

He was active for a period in Mexico in a political group (Socialismo y Libertad) which published a few issues of Mundo and then split due to differences. For the most part, Serge was a fish out of water in Mexico: he was writing in French and his audience was in Europe and North America. He couldn't publish his work, was very poor, and often hungry. Domestically, he was having problems with his young wife Laurette Sejourné, and his son Vlady, trying to find his own way politically, often opposed Serge in the group, trying to minimize Serge's giant influence.⁵

The Mexico that opened its doors to Trotsky in 1937, had changed by 1941 when Serge was invited to live there, among many refugees from the Spanish Civil War. The government of Lázaro Cárdenas, which Trotsky had characterized in a letter to Alfred

⁴Victor Serge to Podoliak [pseudonym for Hryhory Kostiuk] June 22, 1947. Pseudonym established by Kostiuk, who gave me this letter, during an interview in November 1985. Translation: "I remain -- intransigently [unwaveringly] -- a socialist, a partisan of socialist democracy. The system against which I fought and continue to fight -- you know from experience -- I view as a kind of totalitarianism, i.e. as something new, but extremely inhuman and anti-socialist."

⁵Taped interviews with Vlady, 20 August 1990, and Laurette Sejourné, 6 September 1990, Mexico City.

Rosmer as "the only honest government in the world" was gone, and the act of Trotsky's assassination had deeply affected Mexican politics.⁶ The assassination of Trotsky on Mexican soil was a direct affront to Cardenas, who wrote that the Stalinist thugs had violated the sanctity and generosity of the country's giving Trotsky a home and betrayed the ideals of Mexico.⁷ Though Mexico continued to give refuge to those escaping the Nazified regimes overtaking Europe, the country's internal atmosphere changed during the government of Avila Camacho. It was to this changed atmosphere that Serge and Vlady came in September 1941, followed by Laurette and Jeanine in March 1942⁸.

Serge was out of his element in Mexico: his command of the language was less than adequate, especially for a man who earned his living by writing; He was dizzy with the defeats he had just survived, and the pain caused by the deaths of his comrades at Stalin's hand in the gulag and in Spain, and at the gestapo's hands in Europe. Mexico was exotic and fascinating to Serge, but he was truly isolated there, and desperately poor.⁹

Yet in Mexico there was one other person to whom Serge could relate: Natalia Sedova, Trotsky's widow. Vlady

⁶Cardenas' son Cuauhtemoc quoted his father: "The blood of Trotsky fertilized the soil of our country." Cuauhtemoc Cardenas, Inaugural remarks at Colloquium, "Trotsky, Revelador Politico del Mexico Cardenista," Mexico City, May 18, 1987.

⁷Letter quoted Adolfo Gilly's talk "Espana, Mexico: esperanza y tragedia de los anos 30" Panel title, "El Planeta, El Pais, El Huesped," May 18, 1987, Mexico City.

⁸RCA Radiogram to Nancy MacDonald, March 6, 1942, from Laura and Victor Serge, announcing arrival in Veracruz of 'Laura' and Jeannine. MacDonald Papers, Yale Collection.

⁹Dwight and Nancy Macdonald continued to support Serge financially occasionally, until Laurette could get work, and Serge could publish a few articles in the American left journals. See various letters and cablegrams detailing sending and receiving of monies, MacDonald Papers, Yale Collection.

remembered the day that he and Serge first went to visit Natalia, approaching Avenida Viena by Rio Churubusco in Coyoacan. They had just arrived in Mexico, a miracle in itself, and Serge was eager to see Natalia. Serge had last seen Trotsky in 1927; though they corresponded while they were both in exile in Europe, their paths never crossed again. Having lived most of his adult political life in 'the tail of the comet of Trotsky'¹⁰, and having arrived finally in Mexico where Trotsky's life ended, Serge immediately gravitated toward Avenida Viena. Walking along Rio Churubusco, Vlady recounted, "my father saw the wall around Trotsky's house, where the Old Man was killed. He began to weep, and then broke into sobs."¹¹ It was the first time Vlady had seen Serge really lose his composure. Inside, Serge and Natalia greeted each other with affection, and immediately established a rapport. Later Serge was to write that he and Natalia were the only ones left, "who knew what the Russian Revolution was really like, what the Bolsheviks were really like."¹² They were the last survivors of the revolutionary generation of Left Oppositionist Bolsheviks.¹³

No one else understood this international revolutionary who was at once Belgian and Russian, an anarcho-Bolshevik and committed anti-Stalinist. Gradually he associated with the

¹⁰The phrase is Vlady's.

¹¹Private conversation with Vlady in Coyoacan, August 20, 1990. Vlady and I took the same walk that he and his father had in 1941. We were there to speak at a commemoration of the 50th anniversary of Trotsky's assassination and the inauguration of the Museo Leon Trotsky.

¹²Carnets, 15 Jan. 1944. Serge's daughter Jeannine Kibalchich also fondly remembered the weekly visits with her father to Natalia Trotsky's house. Jeannine Kibalchich, "Victor Serge, Mi Padre," Unpublished essay, October 1990, p. 15.

¹³In 1988 other survivors in the Soviet Union came forward, like Nadezhda Joffe, who spent the years 1929-1957 in Kolyma for her participation in the Left Opposition. Her stepmother Maria Joffe also survived and lives in Israel.

Spanish and European exile community, including Julian Gorkin¹⁴ who had been instrumental in getting Serge his Mexican visa, the French socialist leader Marceau Pivert,¹⁵ Gustav Regler, a political commissar with the International Brigades in Spain, the French novelist Jean Malaquais,¹⁶ Herbert Lenhof, a psychoanalyst of the Freudian school, with whom Serge had fascinating discussions about the human social psyche, and others. Manuel Alvarado, an orthodox Trotskyist, lived near Serge and stopped by there frequently to discuss politics. They had disagreements on the nature of fascism: Alvarado felt Serge was too taken with fascism's similarities with Stalinism¹⁷.

Apart from interviews with survivors of the time, material from Serge's archive in Mexico, and his articles in the American left papers the New Leader and Politics, an important source about this period of Serge's life has been the now declassified documents of the FBI which this author received through the Freedom of Information Act. The FBI kept close tabs on all the exiles in Mexico, and an unwitting but important source for them was Victor Serge, who himself kept abreast of the activities of the various exile communities, writing details to American

¹⁴Former International Secretary of the Spanish POUM (Partido Obrero Unificado Marxista, author of books on Spain, Trotsky's assassination.

¹⁵Leader of the pre-war French PSOP who Trotsky had polemicized against in 1939 as centrist, an associate of Leon Blum in the Popular Front.

¹⁶The French author of Planet Without a Visa and other works, with whom Serge had a falling out, see *inter alia* Carnets, "Malaquais, 17 Oct. 44," p. 133.

¹⁷I interviewed Manuel Alvarado twice, once in May 1987 and again in August 1990, both times in Mexico City. Vlady remembers Manuel as a 'rigid, dogmatic Trotskyist, but with a theoretical rigor.' Alvarado was a full time militant in the Mexican section of the Fourth International, with a keen interest in political economy. After Trotsky's assassination, he went to work as an economist in Mexico's banking system.

friends in letters (and articles to American left periodicals) that were intercepted by the FBI.¹⁸

Serge was not spared persecution in his final exile. Mexico had been a hotbed of GPU activity during Trotsky's stay. The Mexican Communist Party had allowed itself to be used in Stalin's service in 1940 in the first attempt on Trotsky's life led by the painter David Alfaro Siquieros. Laurette Sejourné recalled that Serge was sometimes followed¹⁹, and Vlady remembered one day walking with his father in Coyoacan, when a car suddenly appeared and gunmen inside opened fire. Serge grabbed Vlady and pushed him behind a tree.²⁰ Serge's group was threatened by the GPU's terror tactics, culminating in the physical attack by the GPU and 200 armed Mexican CP thugs (called a brawl by the FBI) on Serge's group at a memorial

¹⁸The FOIA files have deleted the addressee and most of the names (at least of those who are still living) but have left in Serge's name and address as writer of the various letters. FOIA, Office of Censorship, USA, Registered No. 125, Serial No. 5967, letter postmarked April 2, 1943, (unphotographed, but distributed to stations ONI, SDC, MID, DR, examined on date April 5, 1943, 3 pages; letter from VS to ? (deleted), postmarked March 16, 1944 and intercepted and examined March 20, 1944, entitled (by FBI) "Russian Author in Mexico Discusses European Political emigrations to Mexico," 4 pages. In this document we learn that the Russian emigration consists of Natalia Sedova, Serge, and the widow of Andreu Nin, that the Bund is active in the Jewish emigration, that the Romanian and Czech emigration are actively promoting democracy and anti-antisemitic ideas, and of the activities of the representatives of the Comintern in Mexico.

As a result of these communications J. Edgar Hoover addressed a letter to Birch D. O'Neal at the American Embassy in Mexico (May 25, 1944, FBI file 100-36676-20), about Serge, a.k.a. "Victor Napoleon Kibaltchiche, Victor Napoleon Lvovitch, Victor Kibaltchiche, Victor Serge, V. Paderewski [Serge's mother's maiden name] - Espionage-R."

¹⁹Interview with Laurette Sejourné, Sept. 6, 1990, Mexico City.

²⁰Vlady took me to the spot and showed me the tree they hid behind, Coyoacan, August 1990.

meeting for Henryk Erlich, Victor Alter and Carlo Tresca.²¹ Serge's articles in the New Leader, written as the paper's Mexican Correspondent, highlighted their persecution, which in this case resulted in the stabbing of Gorkin. The attacks were not only physical. Serge and Gorkin were slandered, maligned, and boycotted.²² They were called Nazi agents, sinarquistas

²¹See "Paul Castelar, "GPU Terror Starts in Mexico, Former Agent Killed, Opponents in Peril, New Leader, Jan. 24, 1942, p. 1, in which Castelar related that the 'strong-arm squad' have turned on Serge, Gorkin, and Pivert, trying to get them expelled from Mexico and repatriated to their various countries where they would be shot. Serge has a letter in the same issue of NL and on April 17, 1943, the front page article in the New Leader is by Serge, entitled "Gorkin Stabbed as Mexican CP wrecks Erlich, Tresca Meeting." The FBI paid particular attention to these activities, noting that Gorkin was seriously wounded, though Serge was not harmed, and Vlady kept his cool.

The Militant also carried an account of the meeting, quoting from Victor Serge: "At eight o'clock, says Serge, the company of about 100 Communists laid siege to the hall, broke down the iron door and burst into the center looking for the speakers to beat them up. Armed with clubs of bits of broken furniture, as well as knives and guns, they formed a strong-arm squad, evidently recruited off the streets, probably hired, and led by some Communist Party members who kept shouting, 'They are Germans, enemies of Mexico.' The thugs were led by Antonio Mije, Juan Comorera, Julian Carillo and Carlos Contreras. Contreras is a notorious Stalin G.P.U. hatchet-man who was an active leader in the terror against anti-Stalinist workers in Spain during the Civil War." FBI file, NY 100-31551 (declassified on 8/1/73), carrying page no. 13.

Jeannine Kibalchich was also at this meeting, and remembers that the thugs entered just as Serge was speaking. Serge shouted for her to take cover and Enrique Gironella grabbed her and protected her with his body. She felt his warm blood run on her hair, (he had been stabbed) and was frightened into silence. Jeannine Kibalchich, op.cit., p. 14.

²²The story is worth telling because of the incredible intrigue involved, and the way the Soviets, the Cps and the international press were drawn in. Serge, Pivert, Gorkin, Regler and Muniz were labeled 'Fifth Columnists' and the slander was picked up and ferreted back and forth between Spanish, Mexican and American Communist, liberal and conservative papers. The slander was initiated by the Mexican Communist Paper Mundo Obrero. The slander was published several times in the American
(continued...)

²²(...continued)

Daily Worker, then cabled back to Mexico as a story to the effect that 'the American Press' was denouncing these men as Fifth Columnists.

An American campaign to protect Serge and the others was formed and a letter was addressed to Avila Camacho, President of Mexico and Freda Kirchway, editor of The Nation, signed by Roger Baldwin, John Dewey, John Dos Passos, James T. Farrell, Sidney Hook, Quincy Howe, Freda Kirchway, Reinhold Niebuhr, David Dubinsky, Adam Clayton Powell Jr., and 170 other prominent figures, calling on the Mexican government to protect these anti-fascists from the 'reign of terror against refugees whose only crime is that they have been more intransigent [sic] and more consistent enemies of totalitarianism than their accusers [sic].'" (Copy of letter to Avila Camacho) [See also Dwight MacDonald to Serge, Feb. 10, 1942, Yale Collection]

The affair was by no means finished. After Serge, Gorkin and Pivert published a letter in The Nation of Feb. 7, 1942, a mysterious 'Washington Dispatch' appeared headed "Labor Conjunta Contra Espias [Common Labor Against Spies]" in the conservative Mexico City Daily, Excelsior. The dispatch made it appear that the 'American Police' and FBI were interested in the suppression of the Fifth Columnists, thereby implicating the Secret Service and the State Department (FBI Memorandum 57958, Feb. 1, 1942). The article described Serge, for example,

"one Balkisti ... direct successor of Leon Trotzky. This individual ... involved in the trial of the band of apaches of Bonnot in 1909, in France. He managed to flee from French justice and later took refuge in Russia, where he was convicted of common crimes; finally he appeared in Paris at the service of Otto Abetz in 1938, when this German was the chief of the secret agents of Hitler, which enabled him to become today Hitler's ambassador in Paris." [FBI Memorandum 57955]

At this point, the name of the American FBI was used as a source and thus their interest in the affair grew. Then, perhaps worse, it was picked up by the New Masses, March 24, 1942, p. 15, in a 'background' article which chided The Nation for coming to the defense of the 'Fifth Columnists.' On Feb. 28, The Nation published a letter by seven Mexican Deputies, plus Lombardo Toledano, Ludwig Renn and Pablo Neruda (the last three known Stalinists) who "restated the feeling of the Mexican people about the Trotskyists in their midst." "As a result, The Nation's editors retreated considerably in so far as Victor Serge and his partners were concerned." [New Masses, March 24, 1942, reprinted in FBI file 161-9182-1, April 16, 1942.]

Dwight MacDonald continued to campaign on behalf of Serge and his comrades, and the New York Times published an account of the
(continued...)

(Mexican fascists), Trotskyites, enemies of the United Nations. In one press dispatch picked up in the US, Serge was named as one of the instigators of the railway strikes in Mexico²³. The slander campaign was organized by a man representing himself as a French journalist named Andre Simon, who came to Mexico from the United States. However, as an article in the British ILP paper New Leader revealed, Simon's real identity was Otto Katz, an OGPU agent assigned to

"stir up public sentiment against Regler, Serge, Pivert, Gorkin and Muniz. Having started an inflammatory press attack upon them, Katz has now organized 'vigilante committees' to deal with these men, whom he calls 'the leaders of the Nazi fifth column in Latin America.'" ²⁴

Mexican publications closed their doors to Serge. Miguel Aleman, future president of the republic, admitted that there was intense Soviet pressure to deny Serge any means of public expression.²⁵

²²(...continued)

slander campaign (Feb. 1942). A number of the signers of the appeal to Camacho brought the matter to the attention of the State Department, MacDonald told Serge "the State Department takes the view that the attack ... confuses the issue of attacking the real fifth columnists and so -- Roosevelt has asked his personal representative in Mexico to intervene with Camacho and ask that the attacks cease, the request being of course unofficial." (Nancy MacDonald to Victor Serge, March 6, 1942, MacDonald Papers, Yale Collection.)

²³Owen, Roche, (ALN), "Mexico Trotzkyites Peril Rail Transport," datelined Mexico City. This article appeared in the FBI file on Serge, document file 100--36676 (Victor Serge,) indexed May 21, 1944, declassified June 1, 1984. Unfortunately the FBI deleted the published [!] source of this article. It appears that the clipping is from page 3, section 1 of the WORKER. (deletions make exact source unclear.)

²⁴"OGPU Threatens French and Spanish Socialists" and "The OGPU in Mexico," (Unsigned articles), New Leader, Saturday, February 27, 1943, pp. 4-5. This paper is not to be confused with the American paper of the same name.

²⁵MacDonald Papers, 1942, Yale Collection.

Once World War Two was underway and the Soviet Union was seen as the 'bulwark' against fascism, anti-Stalinist views became less palatable in the progressive press. All over Europe and the Americas, Trotskyists found their audience reduced. For a maverick like Serge, a public audience was becoming an elusive butterfly. Serge was not only an ardent anti-Stalinist and anti-capitalist, he was also out of favor with the Trotskyists who thought him a centrist on his way to becoming a social democrat.

Serge was now unpublishable by any press --one publishing house was ruined after publishing his book on the character of the Second World War, called Hitler Contra Stalin.²⁶ Politically isolated and deprived of a livelihood, Serge wrote mostly for the desk drawer, producing some of his best work: Memoirs of a Revolutionary (written from 1942-1943, published first in 1951); what is arguably the finest novel about the purges, The Case of Comrade Tulaev, (1940-1942, published in 1948); his novel of the fall of France The Long Dusk, (1943-1945, published in Canada in 1946); and his novel about the experience of defeat and exile called Les Annees Sans Pardon (1946, published in 1971). He also kept a voluminous and fascinating journal, later published in France as Carnets (published in 1952). His book[lets] included La GPU prepara un nuevo crimen, signed by Serge, Gorkin, Pivert and Regler, published first in the journal Analisis in 1942, another by the same four entitled Los Problemas del Socialismo en nuestro tiempo, (1944, first published in Mundo), La Tragedie des ecrivains sovietiques (1947), La Nouvel Imperialisme russe, (1947), Vie et Mort de Leon Trotski, (with Natalia Sedova, published in 1951.) As well, he wrote a large collection of essays, correspondence, articles on the war, the Jewish Question, psychology, literature, the future of socialism, Mexican archaeology, and the evolution and nature of the Soviet

²⁶Julian Gorkin, biographical sketch of Serge, Mexico archive.

system. He was preoccupied with the character of the world which would emerge from the war, which he thought was transformative and would give rise to new collectivist societies with a technocratic elite in power, and worried about the totalitarian tendencies of these new formations. Should Stalin survive the war, Serge feared he would start World War III.

The end of the war found Serge in a weakened physical condition, his head brimming with writing projects. Vlady encouraged him to return to France, where he could write and publish. His marriage was on the rocks, and Serge despaired of finding an audience in his lifetime for his ideas. It was Vlady who urged him to write the 'infamous' letter to Andre Malraux, which Malraux excerpted and published to show that Serge had become a Gaullist. Nonetheless, before any concrete plans were made to return to France, Serge was stopped by a fatal heart attack,²⁷ in November 1947. He died just after hailing a taxi, before he could tell the driver where to go. His clothes were

²⁷In Moscow in 1989, I was told by Sergei Zavarotnyi that an Italian biographer of Tina Modotti had raised the possibility that Serge did not die of natural causes, but had been poisoned by the GPU with something that would make it appear that he had had a heart attack. I asked Vlady, who replied: "Yes, it is possible he was poisoned, but if anyone poisoned him, it was Laurette." Vlady raised other concerns about Laurette, who appeared out of nowhere in the thirties to become Serge's companion, who according to Vlady was never emotionally committed to Serge, and who months after his death married a prominent Mexican Communist, Arnaldo Orfila and joined the Communist Party herself.

In an interview with Laurette Sejourne in September 1990, I asked her if Serge could have been poisoned: she thought it possible, but did not believe it so. She considered her marriage to him "an error," that she had been too young, and his life too full of tragedy and darkness for her to understand. As well, she took on the task of supporting Serge, while typing his manuscripts in the morning before going to work, returning in the evening to study (she was getting a degree in Anthropology and later became a renowned Mexican anthropologist).

threadbare, he had holes in his shoes²⁸; the driver thought he had picked up a pauper. Later, Laurette, Vlady and his wife Isabel were summoned to the morgue to identify Serge's body. Jeanine was not told for several days. Serge was buried in a cemetery for Spanish exiles, in an unmarked grave. Today, 43 years after Serge's death, Isabel Diaz, Serge's daughter-in-law, is putting up a headstone to this valiant revolutionary.

* * * * *

The final decade of Serge's life was one of the century's most tumultuous and barbaric. From the time of Serge's release from Orenburg in April 1936 until his death in Mexico in 1947, millions were to die unnatural deaths in Stalin's camps and prison basements, millions more in Hitler's camps, and even more in the cities and on the blood soaked battlefields of Europe. A hideous postscript to the slaughter was written by the United States with the dropping 'fat man' and 'little boy'²⁹ over Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945, the final act of World War II, and the first act of the Cold War. Serge experienced first hand the twin horrors of Stalinism and Nazism (in Vichy France). In fact, Serge's life was practically unique in that he personally witnessed or participated in most of the major struggles and ensuing maelstrom of the first half of the twentieth century.

Serge died without an 'estate,' but he left behind him a lifetime of struggle, a commitment to the truth no matter how uncomfortable, "a victorious revolution and massacres in so great a number as to inspire a certain dizziness," and a certain confidence, born of his critical intelligence, in the possibilities of the future.

²⁸Vlady later captured the moment of Serge's death in the second of the trilogy he painted on the assassination of Trotsky. In the famous study of Trotsky's where he was felled with an icepick, there are a pair of shoes floating overhead, with holes in them, over the open pages of a book.

²⁹Code names for the atomic bombs used at the end of WWII.

Thus far we have selectively examined Serge's experiences and the writings that came from them, concentrating on those which came directly from the Russian revolution and the development of the Stalinist system. One could argue that Soviet development continued to be the centerpiece of world history and intimately affected all important historical events in the 30's and 40's, and thus all Serge's subsequent activities and writings bear on the subject under examination -- but for reasons of space and thematic unity, this chapter will not deal with all of Serge's important activities in Europe and Mexico, except in summary form. The rest of this chapter will examine selective instances and writings then, which round out the narrative and analysis developed in the dissertation thus far.

5.2 A Question of Style

The subject of this dissertation has been focused on Serge's Soviet years. The final decade of his life was in many respects just like the rest: filled with writing, politics, danger, hunger, and struggle both political and personal. What has been implicitly shown so far in this dissertation without being stated is that Serge's life experience was so unique and integral to the development of his political thought, that at times it is difficult to separate the two. Serge himself commented, "Events continued to overwhelm us. Even where they took place at a distance I find it hard to separate them from my personal memories."³⁰

There is a paucity of scholarship on Victor Serge, though that situation appears to be changing.³¹ The two Serge scholars

³⁰Memoirs, p. 177.

³¹Recent works on Serge include this dissertation and several articles I have published in the last 2 years; Richard Greeman's projected book on Serge, the film "Victor," in production by Jon Eden, an Italian collection edited by Attilio Chitarin, the work of Sergei Zavarotnyi in the USSR, Jon Eden,
(continued...)

in the English language, Peter Sedgwick (who translated Year One of the Russian Revolution, Memoirs of a Revolutionary, and wrote several analytical articles on Serge) and Richard Greeman (who translated four novels and has sustained a scholarly effort for the past twenty years) both examine Serge's thought in relation to his political activity. Serge himself intertwines his writings with his life experiences. This is partly because Serge, to a large degree, was more engaged than many other writers and observers of the Soviet Union. His writings reflect his experiences in an immediate sense, in all the literary forms he used to express his ideas: fiction, poetry, history, political essays. It is also because Serge does not write in a customary 'scientific' style, but in a literary-autobiographical-political one that transcends the boundaries of both traditional social science and conventional literature.

I have also chosen to demonstrate the evolution of Serge's political thought (about the USSR) through both his experiences and his writings. This chapter breaks somewhat with that style because it treats the period in Serge's life after expulsion from the Soviet Union. While his experiences are very important in revealing the activities and thoughts of the Left Opposition in Europe and the course of international communism, the subject is too broad for the focus of this dissertation. Serge watched the horrendous blood purges and the consolidation of the Stalinist system from abroad, and thus the sequence of political events in this Soviet process are no longer written about from the point of view of the eyewitness/ participant, but from the vantage of the observer/analyst. Nevertheless, the GPU continued to track down voices of opposition in Europe and the Americas, threatening Serge more than once. These instances will be highlighted.

³¹(...continued)

David Cotterill, Bill Marshall, and John Manson in Britain, the Victor Serge Centenary Colloquium in Brussels in 1991.

5.3 Spring 1936: Belgian socialists are fat

Serge's return to the West after more than a decade of severe deprivation in "our Russia of revolutions" brought with it more than a bit of culture shock. Serge summed it up describing the ample meal he shared with an unemployed syndicalist militant -- "Back home over there, this is the kind of meal that a high Party official would eat!"³² -- and the observation on a May Day demonstration that Belgian workers were both well dressed and fat. Serge had seen it before, though it had receded in his memory, but the whole scene was astonishing to young Vlady, who had real difficulty understanding the concept of private property. How could all this be owned by some man? And for what purpose? Serge noted Vlady's incredulity and remarked, "it all seemed mad to my Soviet adolescent."³³

Serge became politically active immediately, even though he was restricted through the terms of his visa from open political activity. The unfolding events in the USSR with their repercussions in Europe and Spain prevented Serge from sitting back simply relieved to be 'free.'

Serge began to write about what he had just experienced and witnessed in the Soviet Union. He was surprised that many of his 'European' political friends, with the exception of Boris Souvarine, preferred he remain silent, since for them "Russia was still an unsullied star" and Serge was "too bitter" after his experience.³⁴ Serge did not refrain from writing the truth in the face of what Souvarine called "an epidemic of highly dangerous stupidity!"³⁵ Suddenly the reverberations of the beginning purges in Moscow hit Serge in Belgium: a rain of denunciations began, inspired by the Belgian CP which led the

³² Memoirs, p. 324.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 326.

³⁵ Ibid.

authorities to revoke Serge and his family's passports. More was to come. Letters went missing³⁶, agents approached Serge in the street, and Serge had to give up his "well-paid work on Leon Blum's Le Populaire due to pressures influencing the editorial staff."³⁷ Communist Party influence in journals and publishing houses made it practically impossible for Serge to publish, and where he had already published (house of Rieder), Serge found his books put on the back shelf, and mention of them deleted from the catalogues. Earning a living was becoming well-nigh impossible.

The long arm of the GPU, later to reach Sedov in Paris, Reiss in Lausanne, the POUM in Spain and Trotsky in Mexico, was stretching its tentacles toward Serge.

Stalin soon realized that Serge's release, like Trotsky's forced expulsion, was probably a mistake. In the West it was more difficult to silence their voices. Still, pressure could be brought to bear. On July 11, 1936, Serge was stripped of his passport and Soviet nationality.³⁸ On July 13, 1936 Serge wrote to Leon Sedov, Trotsky's son, that he had been informed by the Soviet Embassy that a decree of the VTsIK revoked his passport.³⁹ Serge was the victim of police harassment provoked

³⁶A letter from Sedov to Serge, warning him about Sobel never arrived, see VS to LLS, "Piatnitsa, 1936," Nikolaevsky Collection, Hoover Archive, Stanford University.

³⁷Memoirs, p. 328.

³⁸ From Uccles, Belgium, Serge wrote Sedov in Paris on 1 July 1936, that he had a French visa. (Serge to Sedov, July 11, 1936, Hoover Archives) A French visa was not a travel document, however. Soviet consular officials in Belgium would not let Serge know of his changed status, and made it impossible for him to obtain travel documents (letter from Victor Serge to Leon Trotsky, Aug. 10, 1936) so he couldn't go to Paris, where his political activities on behalf of his comrades left behind in the Soviet Union would have been more effective.

³⁹"Vuikhozhy iz Sov. Posol'stva; Tam mne soobshchili shto na postan ovleniem VTSIK'a, ya lishon Sov. Grazhdanstva." Serge to
(continued...)

by GPU-inspired denunciations. He was accused of agitation among striking miners, hiding arms for the Spanish Republicans, and preparing to assassinate the King of Belgium. In the Soviet Union, Serge's relatives were arrested and disappeared, never to be heard from again.⁴⁰

The Belgian Communist press demanded Serge's expulsion from the country, and Serge's former friend, Jacques Sadoul began a campaign of despicable slander against him. In two articles published in L'Humanite, Sadoul called Serge a "common criminal," the "brains behind the Bonnot gang of 1911," who was now using "political to camouflage his complicity in the crimes of Trotsky and the defendants at the Moscow Trial."⁴¹ Sadoul pressed for a boycott of Serge, and was largely successful. His invective was so vile that it led Trotsky to write Serge, at a time when their relations were strained because of their differences on the nature of the Spanish POUM:

...To pick up a copy of l'Humanite is always to injure one's own feelings. My young friends drew my attention to Jacques Sadoul's article against you, an exceptional article even for that prostituted publication. ... Jacques Sadoul judges you and excommunicates you in the name of the revolution. ... He places himself between you and Lenin as Lenin's right-hand man.... How could I not feel it necessary to express my sympathy and solidarity with you, and at

³⁹(...continued)

Sedov, Uccles to Paris, 13, July 1936, Hoover Archive, Nikolaevsky Collection.

⁴⁰Serge's family in the USSR consisted of his older sister, mother-in-law, two sisters-in-law and two brothers-in-law, their offspring, and cousins. They were all apolitical. Other Oppositionists' families suffered similarly. Serge wrote of the fate of wives and children of Oppositionists who disappeared into the gulag in his personal diary, Carnets. In his diary entry for July 6, 1946, he recounted the fate of Kamenev's wife (Trotsky's sister), and Rakovsky's daughter, both of whom disappeared into the most wretched of the camps. See Serge, "Pages of a Journal," New International, Nov. Dec. 1950, p. 369.

⁴¹L'Humanite, Feb 2 and 14, 1937. Discussed in the correspondence between Serge and Trotsky.

the same time say to the French workers: Jacques Sadoul is lying! But the slanderer reached the depth of ignominy in the lines where he speaks of your careerism, of your concern for 'material advantages,' and where he, Jacques Sadoul, calls you, Victor Serge, a literary servant of others. Nothing is more repugnant than a servile philistine who has been told by powerful masters: 'You can do anything.' Victor Serge, you remained in the ranks of the Opposition without wavering, in the midst of an unprecedented repression, when less steadfast persons were capitulating one after the other. In prison and in exile, you belonged to the band of those whom the Thermidorean hangmen could not break. You chose, my dear friend, a very bad route to ensure your 'career and material advantages.' Why did you not follow Jacques Sadoul's example? He moved around the Soviet revolution until he could return to France, where he became a correspondent for Izvestia. From Paris, he sent insipid scribblings, dictated by GPU agents. What a courageous, valorous heroic post! Dear Victor Serge! We know how to have contempt for these people, as you do. ... A single article by Sadoul permits an infallible diagnosis: 'Stalinism is the syphilis of the labor movement.' The Comintern is doomed to destruction. The Sadouls will desert the sinking ship like rats. They will betray the Soviet Union five minutes before serious danger. So let us teach the youth to have contempt for this human fungus. A few more years and the vanguard of the proletariat will pass over not only the servants but also their masters. You will be among those whose names will be linked to the revival of the liberation struggle of the working class!"⁴²

Serge left Brussels for Paris on Oct. 26, 1936⁴³, ostensibly for two weeks, but apparently remained. Thanks to Sadoul and the Soviets, Serge had no access to the mainstream Parisian press.

⁴²Lev Davidovich Trotsky to Victor Serge, "On the Subject of Jacques Sadoul," March 5, 1937, first published in Le Mouvement Communiste en France (1919-1939), edited by Pierre Broue (Minuit, 1967). In Writings of Leon Trotsky (1936-1937), pp. 218-220.

⁴³Serge to Sedov, 18 Oct. 1936, "I'll be there [Paris] on the 26th..." [Budu 26vo i khotel bui Vas bidet v gorode 27vo ili 28vo nepremennno.] Nicolaevsky Collection, Hoover Archives, Stanford, CA.

Certain Oppositionists were distrustful of Serge upon his release, reasoning that Stalin would only have let him go if he thought Serge would be of use to him⁴⁴. Nonetheless, once in exile Serge set to work protesting publicly against the Moscow Trials and campaign of terror. The campaign of slander emanating from the Communist Party press against Serge effectively cut his access to the so-called left, and pressure from Moscow accomplished the same with the mainstream press. Only the Belgian daily La Wallonie carried his articles, and far left journals with a tiny circulation.

Despite the boycott, Serge began the nightmarish task of unravelling the labyrinth of these tragedies. Working with Trotsky, Sedov, Fritz Adler, Boris Nikolaevsky and others, Serge combed the Soviet press and took the testimony of Ciliga, Reiss, Krivitsky, and Barmine.⁴⁵ In Belgium, France and later Mexico, Serge and a few others waged a long battle for the truth. In dozens of articles published from 1936-1939,⁴⁶ Serge exposed the lies behind the charges in the Moscow Trials. He set up a "Committee for Inquiry into the Moscow Trials and the Defence of Free Opinion in the Revolution" in Paris, including many French intellectuals and artists,⁴⁷ and Serge himself testified on conditions in Russian prisons and the situation of the families of the victims.⁴⁸

⁴⁴Ignace Reiss, whose real name was Walter Poretsky was wary of Serge, as was Walter Krivitsky. See Poretsky's wife's remarkable Memoir, Our Own People, Oxford University Press, 1969, p. 244-246.

⁴⁵Serge ghosted Barmine's book.

⁴⁶In La Wallonie, Socialist Call, Revolution Proletarienne, etc.

⁴⁷Memoirs p. 331.

⁴⁸The Case of Leon Trotsky, Merit Press, 1937, pp. 43-44. See also Serge's entries in Carnets for the fate of prominent Bolshevik relatives, such as Kamenev's wife Olga (Trotsky's sister), Rakovsky's family, etc.

5.4 Trotsky-Serge and Serge-Sedov Correspondence of Spring and Summer 1936: Reunion of Left Oppositionist Exiles

The summer of 1936 was dramatic: In June the Popular Front of Leon Blum was elected into power and there was an immediate general strike; July saw the beginning of the Spanish Civil War, followed by the earthshaking⁴⁹ bombshell of August -- the Trial of the Sixteen in Moscow. All of these struggles were fervently discussed and evaluated by the exiled Left Oppositionists in Europe.

The Left Oppositionists in question were groups of expelled Communists and young recruits to the politics of the Left Opposition of Leon Trotsky in most of the countries of Western Europe. Trotsky and Sedov were the only Russians, and now Serge joined them in the West. Serge had stood with Trotsky formally since 1923, when Serge joined the Opposition. They had struggled against Stalin openly in the Soviet Union until 1927, when they were both expelled from the Party, and clandestinely since 1928. They had not seen each other since 1927, and were now free to correspond, hopefully to meet again face to face. That these two survived at all was serendipitous, that they now had the chance to work together fantastic.

Serge began his correspondence with both Trotsky and his son Lev Lvovich Sedov as soon as he arrived in Belgium. His first letter to Sedov was written three days after his arrival, his first to Trotsky on his fourth day in Belgium. They corresponded frequently throughout the summer of 1936, despite the interference of the secret police and subsequent losses and

⁴⁹Serge's original working title for his novel of the show trials and purges, The Case of Comrade Tulayev, was "The Earth Was Beginning to Shake," [La Terre Commencait a Trembler.] His undated manuscript of the same title which serves as the author's prospectus can be found in the Serge archive, Mexico City.

delays of letters.⁵⁰ Much of the Trotsky-Serge correspondence has been published in French (1977)⁵¹, but the correspondence between Serge and Sedov was undiscovered until the summer of 1988.⁵² Unfortunately I have only been able to consult the letters from Serge to Sedov (the correspondence from Sedov to Serge is not yet available) so the subject of his letters to Serge can only be guessed from the Serge letters to him.⁵³

The correspondence in 1936 is introductory in character, a very warm and enthusiastic reunion of Left Oppositionist comrades who had survived Stalin's terror only because they were expelled from the Soviet Union, and who now in exile had the opportunity to begin a rich collaboration. Thus the tone of the correspondence is warm and the letters are full of concern as well as information.

⁵⁰There are 16 letters from Serge to Trotsky, 16 letters from Trotsky to Serge, and 25 letters from Serge to Sedov for 1936.

⁵¹An English volume is in preparation by Pluto Press.

⁵²The Hoover Institution of Stanford University announced in 1988 that they had discovered a previously unknown collection of Trotsky's papers within the Boris Nikolaevsky collection which was sealed until 1982. Jean Van Heijenoort and Pierre Broue were allowed access to the collection, and Broue informed me of some Serge letters he had seen in the collection. I contacted the library, and with the generous assistance of Dr. Danielson and Dr. Leadenham, I was able to retrieve photocopies of 77 letters Serge wrote to Sedov in 1936-37. No one knew of their existence prior to this. I am very thankful to Robert E. Wahl for his transcriptions of the poor photostatic copies of the handwritten Russian letters.

⁵³The Sedov letters to Serge are not in the Serge archive in Mexico. They may have been left behind or destroyed in Paris, or they may be in the possession of Laurette Sejourne, Serge's third wife who lives in Mexico City. Although I have spoken and written to her, I have not yet been given access to the trunk of Serge material she has, which she dismisses as "unimportant." No one has seen the material she has. Laurette Sejourne married Arnaldo Orfila, publisher of Siglo 21 and a prominent Mexican Communist, after Serge's death, and subsequently became hostile to Serge the man and his politics.

Serge wrote first to Sedov to establish contact, to find out how to write to Trotsky without the letters being "intercepted by some intelligence service."⁵⁴ He asked Sedov to send "affectionate and loyal fraternal greetings to Lev Davidovich" and to bring the sad news of Lev Solntsev's death from hunger strike. He also warned them about Senin/Sobolevicius⁵⁵, and cautioned: "I've acquired the conviction that agents provocateurs have penetrated the circles of Communist Opposition in the West very deeply, even in Lev Davidovich's immediate circle in 1932-33."⁵⁶

⁵⁴Serge to Sedov, in French, Brussels, April 21, 1936.

⁵⁵Although Serge already suspected Senin as indicated in the letter, Sedov wrote a letter warning about Senin to Serge which Serge never received. Memoirs, p. 328. Adolph Senin and Roman Well were the pseudonyms of the brothers Abraham and Ruvin Sobolevicius, born in Lithuania. Senin visited Trotsky in Copenhagen in 1932, shortly before he and his brother split some members away from the German section of the Left Opposition and led them into the German Communist Party. Senin-Sobolevicius was tried as a Soviet spy in the United States and admitted that he and his brother had been operating as GPU agents since 1931. In 1940 Senin was sent to the United States, and adopted the name Jack Soble. His first job was "to investigate and report on the Trotskyites, and on Jewish and Zionist organizations." He was told there were three "Trotskyite" groups in New York and a Russian agent was planted in each. Later he was put in charge of supervising and recruiting espionage agents. See "Exhibit No. 528," (entered as testimony) by Jack Soble, written with Jack Lotto, "How I spied on U.S. for the Reds," [New York Journal-American, Nov. 10-20, 1957], Scope of Soviet Activity in the United States, pp. 4875-4891.

⁵⁶Ibid. In a later letter to Sedov, dated only "Piatnitsa" (1936), Serge elaborated on Senin: "O Senine -- Sob., moye mnenie nye ustanobleno: ili provokator ili kaptulyant (pod arestom) txelikom razyugrannim provokatrami. Chto s nim stalos'? --Opobestit' o nyom -- mozhno, no menya upominat' ne nado. Iz Sibiri mne pisali chto on -- provok., prichyom ochen' ybeditel'no argumentirya." Serge to Sedov, "Piatnitsa" 1936, Boris Nicolaevsky Collection, Hoover Archives, Stanford. [trans. "About Senin, Personally, my mind isn't made up: whether he's an agent provocateur or a capitulator (under arrest) entirely tricked by provocateurs. What happened to him? It (continued...)]

The next day Serge wrote his first letter to Trotsky. He had a mass of information to get to Trotsky: he began with news of his situation, and news of comrades left behind in the gulag. First he extended a "fraternal salute, the warmest, truest and sincerest possible, from a handful of deported and imprisoned comrades who are heroes and whose entire thought is still tender towards you -- you of whom for years we have known almost nothing."⁵⁷ He informed Trotsky of Solntsev's death in Novosibirsk of hunger strike, and of Dumbadze's grave situation in Sarapul. He passed on heartfelt greetings from Boris Eltsin who had been with Serge in Orenburg, and his son Victor Eltsin in Archangel.

Serge told Trotsky how in deportation our "thoughts turned constantly to you from the abyss of these black years." The authorities tried everything to destroy Trotsky's influence, as is well known, including officially leaked rumors and falsehoods to demoralize and confuse Trotsky's erstwhile supporters. Thus, Serge wrote Trotsky:

"at the time of Rakovsky's capitulation, the N.K.V.D. officers in private 'chats' with followers of the 'general line' put out the rumour that LD had applied or was going to apply for permission to return to the USSR on certain conditions...."⁵⁸

The NKVD ploy had no success whatsoever. The subtext was to communicate to Trotsky the importance of his continued principled struggle abroad, news of which reached the prisoners

⁵⁶(...continued)
might be possible to inform on him, but don't mention me. They wrote me from Siberia that he's a provocateur, which is arguing pretty convincingly."

⁵⁷Serge to Trotsky, April 22, 1936. (All letters will be quoted by date since I am not working from the French published edition, but from copies made for me from Peter Sedgwick's private collection, now held by Pluto Press.)

⁵⁸Serge to Trotsky, in Russian, April 29, 1936. (Most of Serge's letters were in French, Trotsky's in Russian.) Letter no. 6, my collection.

sporadically. It boosted their morale and kept them on course. Interestingly this even affected those who had capitulated and now regretted it, as Serge portrayed in the figure of Kostrov in his Midnight in the Century. Finally, to convey to Trotsky the mood of these comrades, Serge related how

"joyfully the comrades who remained under the GPU's heel saw me off ... The mere thought that someone was going to give their fraternal greetings to you meant so much to them. Deportation and prison have already steeled remarkable dedicated and staunch revolutionaries, who face their systematic suffocation with extraordinary fortitude. All the comrades I've mentioned are like that."⁵⁹

This account is unique and in marked contrast to other prison Memoirs like that of Evgenia Ginzburg or Maria Joffe,⁶⁰ whose portraits of isolation, confusion and despair heavily overshadow the occasional tiny glimpses of human solidarity, human kindness, conviction and fortitude that Serge emphasizes. This probably is due both to the time and the people each came into contact with: both Ginzburg and Joffe deal with the general terror of 1937 and after, while Serge is confined in exile with committed oppositionists, imprisoned and exiled before the mass terror of 1936-1939. Those arrested before Kirov's assassination were committed politicians; after 1936 anyone could be arrested, on the slightest pretext.

Serge eagerly read the published copies of the Bulletin of the Left Opposition once he arrived in the West, and was relieved to find he was in broad agreement. Serge had worried that "we in deportation, cut off from the comrades who can breathe freely, might accumulate considerable disagreements with

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ The obvious reason is that Serge's experience is pre 1937, the year of massive arrests and massive bloodletting, and because Serge was relatively privileged to be in deportation with other left oppositionists. Both Ginzburg in Kolyma and Joffe in Vorkuta had little comfort of political solidarity.

them⁶¹" but was pleased to find virtually no differences with what he read in the Jan. 1935 Byulleten, no. 42.

Serge also told Trotsky about his own arrests and deportation, which Trotsky published in the Bulletin, repeating the story Serge believed was true about his young sister-in-law: that the NKVD attempted to base their charge against Serge on "false testimony extracted from his young sister-in-law Anita Russakova." Serge firmly believed that Anita was subsequently sentenced to five years in Vyatka in 1936 "in order to hide the disgusting concoction of my case, formally for 'technical aid to the Trotskyites.'" ⁶²

The first letters from Trotsky to Serge are very warm, with Trotsky particularly concerned with the state of Liuba's mental health, and Serge's precarious political situation. In response to Serge's news, Trotsky wrote he was "deeply affected by the news of Solntsev's death," ⁶³ one more in a long line of close associates who died or were killed. Trotsky implored Serge for detailed information, even if brief, and for Serge to write in the Bulletin (under a pseudonym or unsigned to protect him from the GPU.) Trotsky promised to be an "indefatigable letter-writer" to Serge.

He also offered to help Serge materially, by citing Serge's work a few times in the long introduction Trotsky was preparing for the second edition of The History of the Russian

⁶¹Victor Serge to Lev D. Trotsky, April 29, 1936.

⁶²Victor Serge to Trotsky, April 29, 1936. Anita Roussakova survived 21 years in the camps and was interviewed in Moscow in Sept. 1989 by Les Smith and Roy Battersby (for a film on Serge): she told them that she was never arrested until 1936. This undercuts Serge's understanding for the basis of his arrest, although it did become the basis for Anita's arrest. When she was taken and interrogated by Rutkovsky, she was presented with the same confession Serge had been confronted with three years earlier. Taped interview, Moscow, Sept. 1989.

⁶³Trotsky to Serge, April 24, 1936. (in Russian)

Revolution, which would help publicize Serge's name.⁶⁴ Trotsky encouraged Serge to write, in fact to consider writing his political work, and to publish in America, where compensation was the most generous. Trotsky was trying to convince Serge that writing was a way to get around the political restrictions imposed on Serge by the conditions of his stay in Belgium⁶⁵, and that the writing itself was a way to put bread on his table. Further, Trotsky added, "If you write a book with the talent that is yours and that I only discovered while abroad, you will be more useful to the movement than in any other way."⁶⁶ Trotsky also asked Serge for news of his son Seryozha⁶⁷, his first wife Alexandra Lvovna, her sister Maria Lvovna Sokolavskaya and his grandchildren in their care.⁶⁸

Serge's letter to Trotsky of April 25, 1936, was published in part in the Byulleten' oppositsii (Paris), No. 50, May 1936. Serge's was the first live information from the Gulag, and the information was not good. The news was of imprisoned oppositionists who were, nonetheless, defiant, combative, and in

⁶⁴LDT to VS, May 8, 1936. Trotsky then wrote a dispatch to AP on the Stalin constitution and the treatment of the oppositionists "Political Persecution in the USSR," May 22, 1936, (found in LDT Writings, 1935-1936). He used Serge's material en toto, without mentioning Serge's name, in order to protect him politically. The dispatch was sent to thousands of American papers. LDT to VS, postscript May 20, 1936 in letter of May 19, 1936.

⁶⁵Especially if Serge published in French publications while living in Belgium. LDT to VS, May 8, 1936

⁶⁶LDT to VS, June 3, 1936.

⁶⁷LDT to VS, April 24, 1936.

⁶⁸LDT to VS, April 29, 1936. Eleven of the letters Trotsky wrote to Serge are collected in volume Writings of Leon Trotsky: Supplement (1934-1940), Pathfinder Press, New York, pp. 657-683. Trotsky's grandchildren left in Alexandra's care were Zina's daughter, Nina's two children, and Lyova's son (Liulik). See Pierre Broue, Trotsky, Paris, Librairie Artheme Fayard, 1988, pp. 551, 691, 804.

good spirits. But their physical condition was quite critical in certain cases,⁶⁹ and Serge openly campaigned for something to be done.

Serge became Trotsky's French translator, working on Revolution Betrayed. This work was important for Serge in both a political and material sense, and Trotsky trusted Serge's translations without checking.⁷⁰ Once Trotsky was in Norway, the conditions of his house arrest interrupted his correspondence. It appears that at this point Lev (Lyova) L. Sedov became the most trustworthy conduit of information between Trotsky and Serge. Any problem Serge had with Trotsky's translations, including suggestions to make the text stronger were written to Sedov, who then passed the information to Trotsky.⁷¹

Serge translated very quickly and was generally pleased with Trotsky's "ochen khoroshei i poleznoi knigi. Rad tomy chto vo mnogikh mestakh, moi vyiivodui sovershenno sovпали s evo

⁶⁹For example, Dumbadze was in Sarapul, paralyzed in both arms, unable to even dress himself, with no medical attention, trying to exist on 30 rubles per month.

⁷⁰Trotsky happily wrote Serge, "I cannot dream of a more qualified translator than you." LDT to VS, June 3, 1936. Later Trotsky told Serge, "Your comments about the translation of my book prove that you are extremely conscientious about this task. You are such a good stylist that there is no need at all for you to check with me on the 'freeness' of your translation; I fully endorse your formulations in advance." LDT to VS, August 18, 1936.

⁷¹For example, Serge to Sedov, p. 21 (undated letter, partially typed in French with handwritten note on bottom of page in Russian), also Serge to Sedov, 13 July 1936 and 31 July 1936. Serge was paid for the translations, greatly alleviating his material condition.

Serge was both translator and editor at times. He wrote to Lyova Sedov (no date other than 'mercredi' with text in Russian) that he has shortened the text of the Hippodrome speech which Serge feels really shouldn't be included in the book as it is repetitive. Serge criticizes the structure of the book which is simply a collection of speeches and notes, and its repetition, saying it will kill the book.

vuivodami, tak chto, pokamest', b obshchikh chertakh obe knigi strelyayut tochno v odno napravlenie!"⁷² Serge was writing his own Destiny of the Revolution at the same time as Trotsky was writing his Revolution Betrayed, which Trotsky wrote he was "impatiently awaiting" to read. Clearly the two Oppositionists were on the same 'wave length' and responded similarly to the new world conjuncture: it wasn't the first time. There is a certain correspondence of the subjects they undertook at various conjunctures: Serge's Year One of the Russian Revolution and Trotsky's History of the Russian Revolution; both on Literature and Revolution; both wrote biographies of Stalin in 1940, both wrote biographies of Lenin, and both wrote their memoirs. The comparison could be continued throughout the two bibliographies, with Trotsky writing more, but not taking on the novel form, to which Serge turned in order to better convey the atmosphere of the times.

Trotsky tried to orient Serge politically to Western Europe, and specifically to the various groups, grouplets and individuals with whom Serge was in contact. Trotsky warned Serge about the Paz couple; he said Magdeleine's work to gain Serge's release was "the only praiseworthy thing she has done in her life," and he found her husband to be "a bourgeois conservative, harsh, narrow-minded and profoundly repulsive."⁷³ He characterized Boris Souvarine as "a journalist not a revolutionary," with "a purely analytical intellect" "negative" with a character that makes him poisonous in a group but also incapable of independent work.⁷⁴ Trotsky discussed these mutual

⁷²Serge to Sedov, 18 August 1936, postscript. Translation: "wonderful and useful book. I'm happy that in many places, my conclusions completely coincide with his, while overall both books shoot in exactly the same direction."

⁷³LDT to VS, April 29, 1936.

⁷⁴LDT to Serge, April 29, 1936. Trotsky wrote that Souvarine's book on Stalin, which he only skimmed, is "from a theoretical and political point of view ... worthless."

friends and comrades in the context of the role of the Mensheviks in the USSR, who were now accommodating to the Stalinist regime and thus aiding the persecution of "our friends." Trotsky believed that social democrats internationally were drawing closer to the Stalinists, and hence the line between the social democrats and themselves must be clearly drawn. Trotsky wrote that their problem was not how to protect those Mensheviks who were suffering from the Stalinist regime, but how to "protect our own selves from low blows by Menshevism and Stalinism internationally, while conducting a pitiless campaign to unmask them." In that light Trotsky attacked the Menshevik 'deviations' of both Ante Ciliga and Boris Souvarine. Of all the comrades they knew in common, Trotsky wrote approvingly only of Alfred and Marguerite Rosmer, whom despite disagreements, "remain in esteem and sympathy."

Trotsky's evaluations were harsh, and Serge defended his associations, stressing the importance of getting to as wide an audience as possible. Trotsky was obviously quite determined to bring Serge firmly within the framework of the International Left Opposition, and its conceptions about what kind of work and with whom it was to be done in Europe.

Thus the correspondence in the summer of 1936 was warm and comradely, while clarifying points of agreement and departure. This began over individuals, those with whom Trotsky felt collaboration was possible, and those who Trotsky felt would end up on the other side of the important battles. Serge on the other hand, felt he owed a personal debt to his friends who had struggled for his release, and had by no means consigned to the dustbin of reform or reaction those comrades who were revolutionary syndicalists or supporters of the POUM (e.g. the comrades in the journal La Revolution Proletarienne.)⁷⁵ Serge

⁷⁵ According to Trotsky's biographer, Pierre Broue, Trotsky was indignant that Serge had written in La Revolution Proletarienne, because its editors believed that Stalinism was
(continued...)

stressed to Trotsky in his letter of May 23, 1936 that he was NOT a syndicalist, but that revolutionary syndicalists could be considered allies and that an "amicable and non-sectarian debate" should be carried out with them. Trotsky did write in response that he was glad of Serge's efforts to influence these comrades, but did not change his essential appreciation of them.

Already dismayed by the atmosphere in which internal squabbling impeded the effectiveness of political work, Serge wrote to his friend Marcel Martinet, on May 15, 1936, about his distaste for the divisions in the French left and how he hoped his work could bring them together again "by a sort of disarmament of antipathies." Serge was pained by what he considered petty divisions and his own position within this left, all the more since he felt he owed all of them something for their work to release him. Serge worried that

"I'll end up full of resentment or sectarian hostility or all ready for an action that's flashy but defensible after all ... I'm in reality a curious mixture of moderation and austerity, it's not my fault if austerity tends to prevail right now. In short I refuse all action that's loud or sectarian..."⁷⁶

Serge's correspondence with Trotsky revealed that Trotsky wanted very much to have Serge as a close political ally. Still, Trotsky harbored some suspicions about Serge's release, as did other Soviet exiles. While writing to Serge with incredible warmth and camaraderie, he wrote at the same time to Lola Estrine, aka Paulsen, aka Lilia Dallin, and warned her that if Stalin had released Serge, then he must have thought he could

⁷⁵ (...continued)

the continuation of Bolshevism. Trotsky would have preferred Serge's collaboration with the bourgeois press to RP. The editors of RP in this period were Monatte and Louzon, not the same figures who had struggled for Serge's release. Interview with Pierre Broue, May 22, 1987, Mexico City.

⁷⁶VS to Marcel Martinet, 15 May 1936, in Victor Serge & Leon Trotsky: La lutte contre le Stalinisme, textes 1936-1939 presente par Michel Dreyfus, Maspero, Paris, 1977, pp. 157-159.

use him. Poretsky also wrote this in her memoir, Our Own People.⁷⁷ Trotsky did not believe that Serge's release was due to the pressure exerted at the International Writers Congress,⁷⁸ but that Stalin felt he could use Serge, or perhaps worse, Trotsky feared a deal had been made. Trotsky warned Estrine/Dallin to watch Serge very closely: watch his body language, his style, any suggestion that he was acting as an agent.⁷⁹

As it turned out, Serge was incorruptible, a tireless and honest campaigner to reveal the truth about the Stalinist counterrevolution. Perhaps more than anyone else in Europe, Serge's chief occupation became to campaign for his comrades left behind, and to expose the lies of the trials. Sedov was also entirely preoccupied in this effort, but because of the split in the French section and the internal squabbling between Trotsky and the two groups in France and the Belgians, much time was devoted to internal matters, leaving less for the necessary public campaign, which Serge picked up. In fact in Serge's letter to Trotsky of May 27, 1936, Serge laid out the broad outlines of what he thought would be effective political

⁷⁷Poretsky doubted that the campaign or even Gorky's intervention was responsible for Serge's release, and raised the possibility that the Soviets may have instigated the campaign themselves. She remembered sitting with her husband and Krivitsky at the Cafe des Deux Magots when they read of Serge's release. She at first took it to mean a turn for the better in the Soviet Union, but both Ludwik and Krivitsky told her that "no one leaves the Soviet Union unless the NKVD can use him" and Ludwik thought Serge's contacts with opposition groups would be invaluable to Moscow. Poretsky, Our Own People, p. 245.

⁷⁸See Orenburg chapter *infra*, pp. 36-40.

⁷⁹Leon D. Trotsky to Lilia Estrine-Dallin, May 1936, Boris Nikolaevsky Collection, Hoover Archives. I was not able to locate this letter [my access to the collection is through the archivists] but its content was summarized for me by Pierre Broue, who had first access with Jean Van Heijenoort to the Nikolaevsky collection at Stanford's Hoover Archive. Access is still restricted, until the collection is properly indexed.

campaigning in Europe on behalf of those languishing in the gulag and equally important, "to raise in a particular manner the issue of proletarian democracy -- in the shape of freedom for Socialist opinion in the Soviet Union." Serge added that "to be a success, our campaigning must avoid being sectarian" and in this vein Serge disagreed with Trotsky on the Mensheviks today - - whereas in the Civil War they were counter-revolutionaries, today seventeen years later

"there is no other question of public emergency except that of making up our minds whether we, in the midst of persecution and imprisonment, are going to deny to our cell-mates the rights of speech and thought which the bureaucracy is denying to all of us. Any such attitude of denial would be indefensible, and amount to our political suicide. Alternatively, while recanting none of the traditions of October, we can and must engage in a practical re-discovery of what workers' democracy means, proving that we fear neither debate nor rivalry and that we are not in anyway the kind of people who build an enormous prison for anyone who disagrees with us. -- I'm writing all this to you because I've been told that you oppose collaboration with all parties and groupings in this particular matter."⁸⁰

It appeared that Trotsky attacked politically all those who did not join him in the project to found the FI. In fact, Trotsky became indignant when Serge wrote for La Revolution Proletarienne, which Trotsky considered an act hostile to the Fourth International. Trotsky had hoped Serge would play a leading role in the young International, as an older comrade with Russian experience. Serge's contributions to non-FI journals seemed to Trotsky a confirmation of hostility.⁸¹ Serge

⁸⁰VS to LDT, Brussels, May 27, 1936, 8 pp.

⁸¹ Trotsky saw a letter Serge had written to the editors of La Revolution proletarienne in the May 16, 1936 issue of L'Action socialiste-revolutionnaire. In his letter to Serge of May 19, 1936 he admitted it bothered him that Serge wrote exclusively to a syndicalist group and added: "if you feel you are politically closer to syndicalism than Marxism, then it remains only for me to take note of this profound difference between us."

was not at all hostile to Trotsky, but principally concerned with publishing wherever he could, in order to raise the issue of the imprisoned revolutionary generation in the Soviet Union.

Trotsky told Serge that he [Serge] did not yet have a feel of "the real mechanics of the struggle as it has been carried out these last few years." He warned that the crowd around La Revolution proletarienne and the Pazes have "acted like liberals," whereas 'our' own comrades have done real work. Trotsky cited the work of their comrades during Bukharin's famous visit to Paris in 1936:

"the bolshevik-leninists burst into his conference and launched an appeal on behalf of the political prisoners of the USSR. Of course they were thrown out of the hall. It is only because of this kind of revolutionary action that the liberals could score a certain victory: 'reforms' (such as your release) are always a by-product of revolutionary struggle."⁸²

What is rather strange about this demonstration of 'revolutionary struggle' on the part of the Trotskyist 'Bolshevik-Leninists' which Trotsky implied was more effective than the struggle around Serge's release, is that it is no different than the struggle Magdeleine Paz and the Revolution proletarienne group waged to secure Serge's freedom. They interrupted the International Congress of Writers, intervened constantly in meetings of intellectual fellow travellers, until Stalin became aware that the Serge affair was making life uncomfortable for his erstwhile supporters in Europe. Does the act of 'bursting' into the conference make the action more revolutionary than already being in the conference and constantly interrupting on the question of Serge? It appears that what made the action in question revolutionary, was that it was carried out by the 'Bolshevik-Leninists.' Despite the self-congratulatory tone of Trotsky on behalf of his French co-thinkers, the 'revolutionary-ness' of the action is not convincing.

⁸²LDT to VS, May 19, 1936.

Trotsky continued in the same vein on the Rev-prol group; he wrote that they were on excellent terms with the reformist faction of the trade union bureaucracy, which in turn was allied to the Stalinists. He called them "a conservative sect, not at all combative, and lacking any political significance....The revolutionary spirit left them a long time ago."⁸³ While there was most likely some truth to what Trotsky was saying, he arrogantly implied that everyone else's work was worthless compared to the political intervention of his own comrades, whose work was doing more for the liberation of prisoners.

Serge's appreciation of the work of the French comrades in the FI was less sanguine. He was often frustrated that their squabbles kept them from doing the vital public work that must be done. In a letter to Lev Lyovich Sedov on 5 August 1936 he complained:

Neumenie rabotat' nashikh Tov. Frants. chrezvuichaino menya ogorchaet i sklonyaet k dovol'no pessimist. Otsenke ikh perspektiv. tak ne nastroit' organizatsii, tak nel'zya zavoevat' avtoritetui, skolotit' kadru, vilivat' na zhizn'. Takaya slabaya i bezdarnaya kratkovidina vryad-li kuda vuidet. Pishu eto posle chtenia gazetui i biulletenui (na Fr.) Net dazhe nikakoi okhotui obrashchat'sya k Tov. s kritikoi, do togo ona kazhetsya bezpoleznoi, kogda vremeni tak malo dlya poleznoi rabotui.

Napishu eshchy ob etom [?] -- i bol'she ne budu vozvr[ashchat']sya ko vsemu etomu; -- otstranius' v liter. rabotu. Takaya adskaya gruiznya i takaya bezpomoshchnaya agitatsiya! -- Moloduie tov. i simpatichnui i tsennui, no v etoi atmosfere iz nikh nichego ne vuidet. Prostitseza za vse eti predlozheniya, Vui blizhe i vsyo eto uzhe znaete.⁸⁴

⁸³Ibid.

⁸⁴VS to LLS, 5 Avg. 1936, Nikolaevsky Papers, Hoover Institute, Stanford. Translation: "our French comrades' inability to work distresses me extremely and inclines me toward a rather pessimistic estimation of their perspectives. That's no way to build an organization, it'll never win over the authorities, assemble a cadre, or achieve lasting influence. Such feeble and bungling shortsightedness will hardly get you (continued...)"

There is an interruption in the correspondence after September 1936, due to Trotsky's conditions of house arrest in Norway, and the letters continue sporadically through 1939. We will take up the subsequent letters below in terms of the areas of contention between Serge and Trotsky. The correspondence reveals what Adolfo Gilly described as Trotsky's Universalism⁸⁵; Trotsky was very warm and generous with potential cothinkers, but with his political collaborators he was sharp, to the point, and did not mince words. The pattern of warmth but political sharpness is evident in Trotsky's correspondence with Andreu Nin, Boris Souvarine and Victor Serge.

5.5 Unraveling the Labyrinth (of Madness): Victor Serge and the Purges

Two events hit like thunderbolts the summer of Serge's expulsion to the West. European skies were darkening with impending fascism and war, when suddenly revolution erupted in Spain with the July days in Barcelona. Scarcely a month later, the boom dropped in Moscow, with the first of the Moscow Show Trials. Vlady remembers Serge's comments at the breakfast table

⁸⁴(...continued)

anywhere. I write this after reading the newspapers and bulletins (in French). There's not even the least desire to address the comrades with criticism, until it appears useless, with so little time left for useful work.

I [won't] write more about it -- and I won't return to all that again; -- I'll distance myself in literary work. Such infernal squabbling and unhelpful agitation! -- The younger comrades are both sympathetic and valuable, but in that atmosphere nothing will come of them. Forgive me for these pronouncements; you're closer to it and already know all this."

⁸⁵Adolfo Gilly, "El Jefe de la IV Internacional: Apuntes y Reflexiones," conference paper in panel titled "Tres Analisis Marxistas del Socialismo de Cardenas," 22 May 1987, UNAM, Mexico City. [Conference titled "Trotsky' revelador Politico del Mexico Cardenista (1937-1987)]. The same point about Trotsky's treatment of his daily political collaborators compared to potential comrades, workers, etc, was made to me by Pierre Broue in conversation at the aforementioned conference.

that August morning: Serge was reading the morning paper and gasped, "we have been saved!"⁸⁶ The realization that he had got out in the nick of time impressed him greatly, and made him feel his duty to his still imprisoned comrades more acutely. Serge swung into high gear and began to write incessantly. His output on the purges alone is staggering: dozens of journalistic articles published in the Belgian daily La Wallonie, far left journals in France and the United States, the books Sixteen Who Were Shot (Sept 1936), From Lenin to Stalin (Dec. 1936), 29 Shot and the End of Yagoda (April 1937), For the Truth About the Moscow Trials! 18 Questions -- 18 Answers (Paris brochure, 1937). He also wrote books on Soviet political developments and the workings of the GPU, biographies, memoirs and novels reporting, analyzing and describing the establishment of the Stalinist system and its significance, such as Destiny of a Revolution, (July 1937), The Assassination of Ignace Reiss, (April 1938), Portrait of Stalin, (February 1940), Pages of a Journal 1936-1938, 1944-1947, his Memoirs of a Revolutionary, and his two novels of the purges, Midnight in the Century (1936-1938), and The Case of Comrade Tulayev (1940-42).

While undertaking this monumental task of untangling the lies spewing forth from Moscow, Serge's domestic problems were acute: his wife was in constant nervous peril, they had no money and no work, and Liuba could barely keep things together. Serge was faced with earning their daily bread, maintaining the home, taking care of baby Jeanine and sickly Liuba (along with Vlady), and writing, and campaigning for his comrades left behind, now certain to die.

Despite the tremendous obstacles, Serge's voice was not silenced. In Mexico, Trotsky defended himself against the most

⁸⁶Interview with Vlady, June 1989, conducted by John Eden and Les Smith.

colossal calumnies,⁸⁷ while in Europe, Serge became the chief lawyer for the falsely accused.⁸⁸ Their audience was limited, their reach -- the world community. The task of defending the truth fell to these lone voices. At a time when all of Europe was in danger of being crushed, Stalin blamed all social ills on Trotsky, his son Lev Sedov, and fellow Oppositionists. Those who upheld the ideals of October were now held responsible for everything gone wrong! Serge noted wryly, in a letter to Dwight Macdonald of 16.1.40, that the Soviet press "has never published a line against the Nazi-fascists and anti-semitism."⁸⁹

Serge's committee in Paris and Trotsky's Dewey Commission in Mexico managed, with precious few resources at hand, to publish irrefutable analyses of the three lying show trials that

⁸⁷See The Case of Leon Trotsky, (Verbatim Transcript of Trotsky's Testimony before the Dewey Commission, Coyoacan, Mexico, April 10-17, 1937, Merit Publishers, New York, 1937. Trotsky proposed Serge as a witness, to testify in Paris. p. 43.

⁸⁸Serge wrote to Lyova Sedov in a letter of 4 September 1936, that they must set up everywhere (Paris, Amsterdam, Brussels) a "commission for a permanent fight against repressions (save our own!) with the anarchists, Revolution proletarienne, left socialists (Pivert), various others and ours." Serge also called on Sedov to help immediately establish a parallel non-partisan commission for the investigation of the Moscow Trials, recommending prominent intellectuals for the French Commission. (VS to LLS, Sept 4, 1936, BNC at Hoover). This became the Paris Committee for Inquiry into the Moscow Trials and Defence of Free Opinion in the Revolution, with the participation of French intellectuals such as Andre Breton, Felicien Challaye, Marcel Martinet, Magdeleine Paz, Andre Philip, Henry Poulaille, Jean Galtier-Bossiere, Pierre Monatte, Alfred Rosmer, Georges Pioch, Maurice Wullens. Serge recommended that other French intellectuals participate, such as Malraux, Gide, etc., but they would not. The long title of the committee was insisted upon by Serge so that they would also have the task of "defending, within the Spanish Revolution, those whom Soviet totalitarianism would attempt to liquidate in Madrid and Barcelona by the same methods of lying and murder." Memoirs p. 331.

⁸⁹Victor Serge to Dwight MacDonald, Jan. 16, 1940, MacDonald Papers, Yale University Collection.

passed for truth in Moscow and the world. Twenty years before Khrushchev's Secret Speech about Stalin's crimes, Victor Serge was trying to alert the world to what was happening in Stalin's Russia. His words fell largely on deaf ears in a Europe where the reality of fascism and the impending war -- whose first battles were being fought in Spain -- blinded many communists' eyes to what was happening in the Soviet Union. 50 years later, Gorbachev's Commission of Inquiry has had to admit that the trials were rigged, the charges fabricated and the accused innocent. But in 1936, Victor Serge refuted the lies and foretold the end of the revolutionary generation, though he felt his foresight 'was absolutely worthless.'⁹⁰ Julian Gorkin wrote that this was probably the most bitter period of Serge's life, when "en libertad, sentia la tragica agonía de sus companeros, de sus hermanos. Y sentia como la revolucion, que constituyo un gran esperanza, se devoraba a si misma."⁹¹

* * * * *

"To choose the victim, to prepare the blow with care, to sate an implacable vengeance, and then to go to bed... There is nothing sweeter in the world!"⁹²

Gorkin wrote that Stalin probably regretted letting Serge go just four months before his Moscow Show Trials.⁹³ A

⁹⁰Memoirs, p. 333.

⁹¹Julian Gorkin, "Adios A Victor Serge," in Mundo # 15, Enero-febrero 1948, Santiago de Chile, p. 6. Translation: "At liberty [Serge] felt the tragic agony of his comrades and his brothers. And he felt that the revolution, which had constituted a great hope, was devouring itself."

⁹²Stalin, to Dzerzhinski and Kamenev, one summer night, 1923. Cited by Serge in Portrait de Staline, Paris, Grasset, p. 177, but Serge noted in a footnote that Souvarine also cited it on p. 446 of his own biography of Stalin, and that Trotsky also cited it in several writings, and it was often repeated by the old Bolsheviks.

⁹³Gorkin, ibid.

threatening voice thus slipped from his grip, and would now require efforts abroad to be silenced.

Serge's voice was limited to a restricted public, but it was not silenced. His task was not simply to refute the lies, but to understand the need for the lies, which meant to understand the role of terror in the creation of Stalin's system of rule. Serge did this unevenly as the following discussion demonstrates. Writing at the time, Serge could not have precisely discerned the social, economic and political system still in the process of formation. To his credit, Serge realized that the purges could not be understood in isolation, and that new social relations were being created.

Serge wrote in the pamphlet Sixteen Who were Shot that the first trial marked the beginning of the extermination of the old revolutionary generation. In La Revolution proletarienne Serge wrote that the massacre was due to the need to wipe out all reserve teams of government on the eve of a war now considered imminent.⁹⁴ By 1937 the threat of a 'reserve' team was not really credible, since most of the Old Guard were already in prison, exile, or dead, and many had capitulated. Furthermore, the newer Bukharinist challenges to Stalin of Riutin (1932) and Kirov (1934) had also been largely eliminated. However it was still important for Stalin to eliminate the resonance of the ideas of the Old Guard and this partially explains the fantastic fabrications and outrageous charges. This was difficult to see at the time, and one cannot blame Serge, writing in 1937, for not yet forming a precise picture of what was unfolding in the Soviet Union. Serge was more on track when he wrote that Stalin needed to eliminate all witnesses to his betrayal of the revolution -- the critical thinking old Bolsheviks who even in prison would be silently critical.

⁹⁴La Revolution Proletarienne, March 1937.

Serge was convinced that the purges were not planned far in advance,⁹⁵ and his own release was living proof: Serge had left the USSR in mid-April (1936) when the accused were already in prison; he had worked closely with Zinoviev and Trotsky, was a close acquaintance of many of those who later disappeared and were shot, had been one of the leaders of the Left Opposition in Leningrad and one of its spokesmen abroad, and had never capitulated. With his skill and renown as a writer coupled with his capacity as a witness with irrefutable facts, Serge would simply be too dangerous abroad, unless at this late date of April 1936, the trials had not been prepared. Serge attributed the fact that he was never accused during the trials as proof that lies were only spread about those who had no means to defend themselves, except in the case of Trotsky, whose stature and astuteness made him an enemy Stalin had to eliminate.⁹⁶

Serge was among a handful of writers at the time who tried to make sense of the madness emanating from Moscow. His analyses and perceptions of the wave of terror which accompanied the establishment of the Stalinist system, were written in the heat of the moment, in multiple form and were meant to be motivational as well as informative, to move people into action to protect the revolution and the revolutionists from Stalin's terror machine. Serge's account, however, is not simply one of an outside observer, but one who experienced Stalin's terror first hand.

Making sense of the terror several years later, Serge was compelled to also make sense of the man behind it, recognizing

⁹⁵Which is not to say that the great purge trials were not premeditated, in the sense of being prepared and rehearsed.

⁹⁶Memoirs, pp. 330-331. Although Serge described the unplanned nature of the purges in the Memoirs, in his pamphlet Seize Fusilees, Serge discussed the premeditated nature of the show trials, that their outcome was decided in advance, prepared and rehearsed. Seize Fusilles: Ou va la Revolution Russe?, Paris, Spartacus Cahiers Mensuels, Serie Nouvelle, No. 1, pp. 4-5.

that "in a tyranny, too many things depend on the tyrant."⁹⁷ He wrote a biography of Stalin in 1940, and then one of the finest existing fictional accounts of the terror machine, The Case of Comrade Tulayev, in which even Stalin appears as a thoroughly human character, albeit committing monstrous acts. The point Serge stressed in all his characterizations of Stalin, both fictional and all too real, was that the man (in power), was formed by the policies he practiced, reacting and conforming, as it were, to the mandates and logic of the situation: the man became the tool of the rising bureaucracy "going from one expedient to another, receiving failures as a boxer receives blows: without blinking, but humiliated in his heart of hearts, returning with fury against his instruments...."⁹⁸ Serge saw Stalin dialectically: agreeing with Trotsky and the Left Opposition that Stalin became the instrument of the bureaucracy, Serge added "Stalinism incarnates the bureaucracy, is beginning to suffocate it; ... it is defined by fear ... by a frenetic determination to endure...."⁹⁹

Stalin and his group destroyed the old intelligentsia, wiped out the revolutionary generation, and subjected the new elite to terror. In the process Stalin became the encapsulation of the elite and then reformed it to become the ruling layer. Serge was correct to see that Stalin had to destroy all the witnesses, above all the revolutionary generation who were trained to be critical, because Stalin could not even bear silent witnesses who understood his betrayal. Serge also understood that the process

⁹⁷Victor Serge, Unpublished manuscript, "Le dernier livre de Trotsky: Staline," 1946, Serge Archive, Mexico City.

⁹⁸Serge, Portrait of Staline, p. 175 (and Spanish Retrato de Stalin, p. 153): "Il va d'expedient en expedient, encaissant les echecs comme un boxeur encaisse un swing, sans ciller, mais humilie en son for interieur, et se retournant avec haine contre ses instruments,...."

⁹⁹Serge, RTYA, pp. 297-298.

which he saw as a betrayal was unconscious¹⁰⁰, proceeding step by step.

While Serge was trying to comprehend the transmutation of the revolution, others, especially in the West, were stymied by the spectacle of Old Bolshevik revolutionaries confessing to unimaginable crimes. Everyone Serge met in Paris asked him to explain the 'mystery of the confessions.' He himself wondered about the mystery of their disbelief!¹⁰¹ Yet Serge realized that these people were unable to understand how human conscience was twisted by Stalin's methods of rule. His own experience helped him fathom how the great Trials were fabricated, how the confessions were dictated and manufactured, and how the accused were 'ripened' through ten years of persecution, demoralization, solitary and torture (including drugs and hypnosis) to sign the baseless documents.

5.6 The Confessions: Why?

Much has been written about the enigma of the confessions, the seemingly inexplicable sight of a Rakovsky, a Bukharin, a Zinoviev confessing to preposterous misdeeds. To Serge there was not one answer or one reason, but many reasons, representing a complex of exhausted revolutionaries succumbing to twisted logic, perverted ideals, misdirected loyalty, fear, and torture. To express these points of view Serge used various forms: essays, articles, polemics and books; and multiple voices, in his fiction and poetry.¹⁰² In his poem "Confessions," Serge

¹⁰⁰In an article Serge wrote in Mexico, published in Rumbo, titled "Balance de la Reaccion Staliniana," Octubre y Noviembre de 1941, pp. 9 & 30.

¹⁰¹Memoirs, p. 333.

¹⁰²This is quite unlike Koestler's approach in Darkness at Noon, where the thought processes leading to confession are seen through the mental gymnastics of Rubashov, the single character who discovers the single truth that indeed the Party cannot make
(continued...)

portrays the misery of men who gave everything to the Party that demanded everything from them, not only their lives, but their integrity and human dignity:

We have never been what we are,
the faces of our lives are not our own,
the voices that you hear, the voices that have spoken so loudly
above the storm
are not our own,
nothing you have seen is true,
nothing we have done is true,
we are entirely different.

We have never thought our thoughts,
believed our faith,
willed our will,
today our only truth is despair,
this confession of a mad degeneration.
this fall into blackness
where faith is renounced and recovered one last time.

We have neither faces nor names, neither strength nor past
--for everything is over and done with
We should never have existed
--for everything is devastated
And it is we who are the guilty, we the unforgivable,
we the most miserable, we the most ruined,
it is we ... know that
--and be saved!

Believe our confessions, join in our vow
of complete obedience: scorn our disavowals.
Once put down, the old revolt is nothing but obedience.

¹⁰²(...continued)

mistakes, and thus he must comply by confessing, since that is what the Party requires. Koestler's view is monolithic, falling entirely in line with stance adopted by the cold warriors that puts an equation between Marxism=Leninism=Bolshevism=Stalinism. In this view, lacking nuance and subtlety, Communism is anti-human, it is the Party versus the people, there is no thinking, only obedience, revolutionaries are incapable of compassion, etc. It is easy to see why Koestler, once he rejected the Soviet Union, became one of the "god that failed" anti-communists. His book is a pure statement of Stalinist thinking. Koestler comes across as quite limited when contrasted to the richness of the voices in Serge's Tulayev.

May those who are less devoted be proud,
 may those who have forgiven themselves be proud,
 may those who are more devoted be proud,
 may those who have not given up be proud.

If we roused the peoples and made the continents quake,
 shot the powerful, destroyed the old armies, the old cities, the
 old ideas,
 began to make everything anew with these dirty old stones,
 these tired hands, and the meager souls that were left us,
 it was not in order to haggle with you now,
 sad revolution, our mother, our child, our flesh,
 our decapitated dawn, our night with its stars askew,
 with its inexplicable Milky Way torn to pieces.

If you betray yourself, what can we do but betray ourselves with
 you?
 After lives such as these, what possible death could there be,
 if not, in this betrayal, to die for you?

What more could we have done than kneel before you
 in this shame and agony,
 if in serving you we have called down upon you such darkness?

If others find in your heart stabbed a thousand times
 the means to live on and to resist you in order to save you in
 twenty years,
 a hundred years,
 blessed are they by we who have never believed in benedictions,
 blessed are they in our secret hearts
 by we who can do nothing more.

We no longer belong to the future, we belong entirely to this
 age:
 it is bloody and vile in its love for mankind,
 we are bloody and vile like the men of this time.

Trample on us, insult us, spit on us,
 vomit us,
 massacre us,
 our love is greater than this humiliation,
 this suffering,
 this massacre,
 your iniquitous mouths are just, your mouths are our mouths,
 we are in you,
 your bullets are ours, and our mortal agony, our death, our
 infamy are yours,
 and your vast life on these fields worked for centuries is
 forever ours!

Paris, October 12, 1938¹⁰³

The purge trials were based on confessions obtained under mental and physical duress. Serge was on intimate terms with many of the accused in the dock; he was able to bring both flesh and nuance to their published confessions, by knowing how these people responded in normal circumstances, how they felt about the Party and the general political situation. Because of Serge's intimate knowledge and descriptive skills, he was able to refute the confessions and explain how and why the accused agreed to participate in slandering themselves. Serge insisted that the mystery of the confession was only an enigma in the West; for anyone who knew the psychology of the Old Bolshevik party, it was no mystery.¹⁰⁴

The confessions to heinous yet preposterous crimes, to complicity with the Gestapo, to individual terror, and to Kirov's murder (many had been imprisoned two years before the murder), were no different in essence from the capitulations to which many oppositionists had been subjected in the decade between 27 and 37: both capitulation and confession were made in the name of the Party. The confessions, said Serge, were made out of utter devotion. Serge quoted Smilga, an oppositionist capitulator, who said "We must retreat, surrender for the present, and when the masses awaken, we shall put ourselves at their head...." and Zinoviev, who often said, "we must remain within the Party, even flat on our belly in the mud, in order to

¹⁰³This is the third section, called 'Confessions' of Serge's long poem, "The History of Russia," collected in Resistance, pp. 18-24.

¹⁰⁴Serge explained the enigma of the confession in various writings: From Lenin to Stalin p. 86, Portrait de Staline (Chapter XXI), "Le troisieme proces de Moscou," in La Revolution Proletarienne, March 10, 1938, Seize fusilees, p. 19, 31-34, Life and Death of Leon Trotsky (with Natalia Sedova), pp. 233-239, and Memoirs, pp. 333-334.

be there on the day of the great awakening of the working masses."

They were done in by their party patriotism. They fell into the trap of believing there was no life outside the Party, and that by acting outside the Party they would play into the hands of counter-revolution. They did not see the counter-revolution within their beloved Party. Their error, which Serge did not commit, was that their attachment to the past prevented them from seeing that the Party was dead and that "no longer with it, but in spite it and against it -- the toiling masses will one day awaken and renew the fight for socialism."¹⁰⁵ Serge, a newcomer to the Party in 1919 with an anarchist past, held no institution so sacred in such a timeless fashion. The lies depended on the defendants' consent, out of attachment for the Party, to sacrifice their consciences and their dignity. Besides, as Krivitsky pointed out in his discussion,¹⁰⁶ the interrogators used the magic words 'socialist,' 'proletarian,' and 'revolutionary,' words that evoked concepts that offered a glimmer of hope in a dark world, concepts to which these men had devoted their lives. In some twisted way these men were led to believe that their confessions would help the concepts behind the words come to fruition, even out of Stalin's bloody tyranny. But not everyone consented, and Serge pointed out that the trials selected from a larger number of accused only those who were compliant, who would sacrifice themselves at the Party's instructions. Serge held no rancor for those who dishonored themselves, as they were Stalin's victims¹⁰⁷, and his poetic ode

¹⁰⁵ From Lenin to Stalin, p. 86.

¹⁰⁶ Walter Krivitsky, In Stalin's Secret Service, New York and London, Harper Brothers, 1939, p. 190.

¹⁰⁷ In an article published in La Wallonie, "Complots en URSS," March 20, 1938, Serge spoke of the great attachment to 'socialism in march' by men who would 'step over their own corpses' in order to serve their party, which still represented to them, though in a distorted way, the vision of socialism.

to them in "Confessions" is characterized by a generous attitude of disapproving understanding. But he remembered those who never gave in, sketching them in his books and articles, so that their memory would be preserved.

5.7 The Revolution In Reaction

Serge's analysis of the significance of Stalin's blood purges, written at the time and without the benefit of hindsight connects Stalin's terror to his chaotic industrial and agrarian policy. He wrote his most complete analysis of Stalin's rule in 1936-1937 in the book Destiny of a Revolution, published as Russia, Twenty Years After in the United States. The books, pamphlets and articles which he poured out in the period up to 1940 extend his basic analysis, but do not contradict his earlier work, except on the question of planning, where Serge vacillates. Russia Twenty Year After, written in his most Trotskyist period, redeems the plan as the one element proving the superiority of the system to capitalism. Later, after Trotsky's death, Serge continued to grapple with the difficult theoretical problems thrown up by the continuing evolution of Soviet society. Writing as a solitary Left Oppositionist correcting the record and upholding the principles of the revolution, Serge was often better able to evoke the atmosphere of Soviet society, than to systematically and consistently define it theoretically.

Serge's ideas can be summarized: the purges, while unplanned and proceeding from an internal dynamic set in motion by Stalin's methods of industrialization and rule, created new social relations and a new, unstable society based on coercion and terror. None of the basic problems of the society were resolved at the end of the blood purges, but millions paid with their lives. A needlessly costly and wasteful industrial infrastructure was constructed, with the help of a massive slave labor sector in the camps. All forms of collective resistance were broken and any residual resistance was atomized, as the

weary population concerned itself with survival, not politics.

What Serge called the ten dark years, from 1927 to 1937, represented the struggle of the revolutionary generation against totalitarianism; the struggle was uneven and the regime was able to use them one against the other, all the more efficiently since "it had a hold on their souls"¹⁰⁸ through party patriotism. Despite this, the "resistance of the revolutionary generation headed by the old socialist Bolsheviks was so tenacious that in 1936-1939 it was necessary for the entire generation to be eliminated, in order that the new regime could consolidate itself."¹⁰⁹

Serge viewed Stalin's accession to power as a counter-revolution, that is a betrayal of everything the revolution stood for, and one of the bloodiest in history, at that. In order to maintain power, Stalin had to change the regime, eliminating entirely the revolutionary generation of Bolshevik militants. The old Bolsheviks of the revolutionary generation, after all, were not managers of production, but critics and revolutionaries. The new conditions required organizers and controllers, men who could repress but not think independently. As Serge's character Rublev wrote in his final thoughts before being shot:

"We were an exceptional human accomplishment, and that is why we are going under. A half century unique in history was required to form our generation. Just as a great creative mind is a unique biological and social accomplishment, caused by innumerable interferences, the formation of our few thousand minds is to be explained by interferences that were unique.... We grew up amid struggle, escaping two profound captivities, that of the old 'Holy Russia,' and that of the bourgeois West,...we perpetually questioned ourselves about the meaning of life and we

¹⁰⁸ Serge, "Trente Ans Apres La Revolution Russe" La Revolution Proletarienne, Nov. 1947, p. 28.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 29.

worked to transform the world.... We acquired a degree of lucidity and disinterestedness which made both the old and the new interests uneasy. It was impossible for us to adapt ourselves to a phase of reaction [my emphasis]; and as we were in power, surrounded by a legend that was true, born of our deeds, we were so dangerous that we had to be destroyed beyond physical destruction, our corpses had to be surrounded by legend of treachery..."¹¹⁰

Stalin broke resistance through artificial famine, super-exploitation of the work force through crash industrialization, the employment of what Serge estimated as 15 -20 million slaves in labor camps, and political persecution for any form of protest, real or imagined. The new society, dubbed a 'concentration camp universe' by Serge had the following social structure: a 'sub-proletariat in rags' of about 15% of the adult population in the camps, and a new privileged elite representing about 7-8% of the adult population.¹¹¹ Serge repeated these new facts throughout his works, as traits pointing to the anti-socialist nature of the new society.

The process was unconscious, but followed a logic. Serge often described the bureaucracy's inability to dominate the forces it evoked against itself, noting the absence of control which resulted in abuses going too far. Serge attributed this partially to Stalin's lack of real contact with the situation and because of this, his inclination to panic.¹¹²

Serge explained in From Lenin to Stalin, that the consequences of a policy cannot be evaded: Stalin found himself in a blind alley with the peasants because he rejected the suggestions for early and gradual industrialization. When the peasant refused to sell his grain under disadvantageous conditions, Stalin resorted to taking it from him by force.

¹¹⁰Victor Serge, The Case of Comrade Tulayev, London, Penguin Books, 1968, pp. 360-361.

¹¹¹Serge, Carnets, entry for Nov. 15, 1946.

¹¹²RTYA, Part III, chapter 7.

This led to peasant resistance which led to forced collectivization, expropriation and deportation of millions of peasant families. Collectivization changed the plan for industrialization to the detriment of the latter. Hungry workers labored inefficiently and left work in search of food; thus draconian laws were passed to force them to work, internal passports issued to prevent free movement, etc, etc. The fifth year of the plan found the country ravaged by famine. The point of Serge's analysis was to show, step by step, how policy was reactive to events, unplanned, and improvised, but produced a system resting on coercion and force.

Serge's works begin and end with the life and conditions of the masses of people affected by Stalin's policies. He described how the methods employed in industrialization in the context of hunger, scarcity and speedup caused the workers to resist in ways that were to become characteristic of the Soviet work process. In the early 30s workers simply walked off the job in search of food and better conditions; at work they produced poorly due to the frantic pace, their weakened physical state and political alienation. Repression was the ultimate work incentive. The conditions Serge portrayed in the first five year plan became permanent features of Soviet economic life; workers responded to the cruel conditions by becoming hostile and resisting in an atomized and individualized manner.¹¹³ Serge described the new working class in formation and the new elite who gained political control over the population through force, but not over economic events, hard though it tried. Throughout his examples Serge returned to the self interest of the bureaucracy as the only logic of the system, taking precedence

¹¹³Serge discussed this in Soviets 29, Russia Twenty Years After, and in essays from the Mexico archive.

over the needs of agriculture, industry and the needs of the population.¹¹⁴

While examining the effects of Stalin's policies on town, country and factory, Serge evoked the conditions of life for the masses, contrasting it to the privileges enjoyed by the 'parvenus.' Economic growth was accompanied by pilfering, sabotage, misery, famine, passport laws, repression and terror. Stalin's methods, according to Serge were anti-socialist, but officially justified by using an 'amoral vulgar Marxism.'

Terror and misery left the population with nothing to think about but their own survival, their own self-interest. In 1937 Serge wrote:

"The inexorable logic that necessitates the disappearance of those who hold the worst State secrets places the gifted leader in a blind alley. ... He himself feels sure of nobody the party is destroyed, governmental circles decimated, the political police decimated, the army decapitated.. purgings everywhere ... repressions in sphere of production ... there is disorder, panic, terror, mute reproof, passive resistance, atomic as it were. Not being sure of the morrow nobody dares to assume responsibility. All the statistics, all the balances, all the figures are false because nobody ever dares tell the truth ... every text is falsified.. the problem is to repeat the words of yesterday while killing yesterday's ideas."¹¹⁵

Here Serge describes with unusual clarity the effect of terror on the behavior and functioning of the new system fashioned by Stalin's methods of rule. Terror was at the heart of the system of coercion in the 30s, which created a particular form of class relations. As the quote of Serge's reveals, the atmosphere of terror meant that no one wanted to assume responsibility, nor did they later want to risk the uneven results of innovation and creativity. Past successes were

¹¹⁴Victor Serge, Soviets 1929, Destiny of a Revolution, and From Lenin to Stalin. Serge also wrote extensively on the effects of Stalin's policies on science, art and literature.

¹¹⁵RTYA, pp. 297-298.

repeated and new thinking avoided. Lying became a way of life, a necessary part of the system provoked by the purges. This was to have permanent and reproducible consequences in economic functioning. From Stalin's vantage point, he could only see sabotage and hence continually tightened the screws in order to gain better control of the economic mechanism which paradoxically eluded the reins of control. The sabotage Stalin saw everywhere was inadvertent, as his directives were often humanly impossible to meet. In this atmosphere, the demand from the top was to get everyone to knuckle under, and thus the denunciations began, to uncover the 'saboteurs.' Again in Serge's fiction Stalin appears to explain:

"Everyone lies and lies and lies! From top to bottom they all lie, it's diabolical ... Nauseating ... I live on the summit of an edifice of lies -- do you know that? The statistics lie, of course. They are the sum total of the stupidities of the little officials at the base, the intrigues of the middle stratum of administrators, the imaginings, the servility, the sabotage, the immense stupidity of our leading cadres. ... The plans lie, because nine times out of ten they are based on false data; the Plan executives lie because they haven't the courage to say what they can do and what they can't do; the most expert economists lie because they live in the moon, they're lunatics, I tell you Old Russia is a swamp -- the farther you go, the more the ground gives... And the human rubbish!... To remake the hopeless human animal will take centuries. I haven't got centuries to work with, not I..."¹¹⁶

What happened to the ordinary 'human rubbish' in these times, as Stalin sought to accomplish in a few short years what would normally take decades, if not centuries? Serge evoked the life of the individual in these circumstances:

"hemmed in by police, by poverty, by lies... [the] worker is preoccupied with obtaining, stamping, checking and re-registering a bread card which is refused half the workers on various pretexts; his wife runs from one empty store to another, registering in a queue at doors of fishstalls in the evening in order

¹¹⁶Serge, Tulayev, pp. 167-168.

to wrangle the next morning over a ration of salt fish ...exposed to spying in the shop ...coming home to tell who was arrested last night..."¹¹⁷

Dominated by fear and panic, the bureaucracy must defend itself. The significance of its actions was that it was not pursuing the interests of the working class, but acting in its own interests.¹¹⁸ In this light, Serge was able to admit that the Stalin and the bureaucracy were correct to seize the moment, which would not present itself again, to rid themselves of their adversaries. The necessity of resorting to such cruel and seemingly mad methods pointed not only to a "tremendous moral weakness" but also revealed an "inward-driven crisis."¹¹⁹

Politically Stalin needed to blame and punish someone else for the difficulties of life caused by his own policies. Behind every obstacle could be found a conspiracy, someone Stalin could blame and execute. The dynamic of denunciation in an atmosphere of fear was like a snowball rolling downhill. In Serge's dialectical novel of the purges, The Case of Comrade Tulayev, one character after another fell victim to the terror which spread in concentric circles radiating outward from the cataclysm of the shot that killed his fictional Kirov.¹²⁰ The bureaucracy, Serge said defended itself and its mistakes by blaming more and more on others.¹²¹ Suppression of freedom of expression, criticism, initiative and popular control increased the costs of Stalinist 'planning' horribly and often led to major failures and a kind of involuntary sabotage against which the regime had no remedy except a reign of terror directed at

¹¹⁷ RTYA, p. 185.

¹¹⁸ Serge, FLTS, p. 61.

¹¹⁹ Serge, RTYA, p. 204.

¹²⁰ An excellent discussion of this novel can be found in the unpublished Ph.D. dissertation "Ideology and Literary Expression in the Works of Victor Serge" by Bill Marshall, pp. 323-361.

¹²¹ FLTS p. 61.

technicians, workers, peasants.¹²² To find the guilty, an order went out to the GPU who arrest and obtain confessions, followed by deportations and executions. The Comintern could be depended on to defend the regime abroad against the saboteurs.

5.8 Intellectual Impotence, Moral Complicity: The Role of Communists and Fellow Travelers in the West

The purges were not confined to the Soviet Union. International Communists were lured into the web, either as victims or co-conspirators. Communists from Poland, Germany, Hungary, Finland, Iran, China, France, Czechoslovakia, Holland, Spain, Italy and the Balkan Cps were drawn into Stalin's constellation of camps, and Soviet agents abroad dreaded the ominous 'recall' to Moscow.¹²³ They knew that 'recall' was synonymous with arrest, arrest synonymous, for the most part, with death. Apart from the infamous activities of the NKVD in the Spanish Civil War, international revolutionaries sympathetic to Trotsky began to 'disappear' or be assassinated. This was the fate of Rudolf Klement in France, and Ignace Reiss in Switzerland, Georgi Agabekov¹²⁴ in Belgium, and in Spain, Andres

¹²²Victor Serge, "Russia," unpublished manuscript, no date, Serge Archives, Mexico.

¹²³See Poretzky, Our Own People, Krivitsky, In Stalin's Secret Service on the fate of Soviets abroad and his own narrow escape from being 'recalled', and Roy Medvedev, Let History Judge on the repression of foreign communists. Alexander Orlov, in The Secret History of Stalin's Crimes wrote that 40 agents were recalled during the summer of 1937, out of which only 5 refused to return.

¹²⁴Agabekov was a top functionary of the secret service of the NKVD in Turkey who broke with Moscow in 1929, and published a book that Serge called "a very extraordinary document of betrayal and informing" in 1935. He had belonged to the Opposition in 1923. He was murdered in Belgium, and according to Orlov, was one of those who "were liquidated in silence on
(continued...)"

Nin, Marc Rhein (the Russian Menshevik Rafael Abramovich's son), Kurt Landau, Erwin Wolf¹²⁵, and Tioli are among the victims we know about.¹²⁶ Even the suspicious suicide of Walter Krivitsky in the United States has been attributed to the work of the NKVD.¹²⁷ Before the U.S. Senate Hearings in 1957 to which both Zborowski and Orlov testified to the hand of the NKVD in Krivitsky's demise, Serge wrote a diary entry for 31 March 1944, entitled "GUEPEOU" that

"X arrived from N.Y. assures me in confidence that the name of the OGPU agent who murdered Walter Krivitsky in a Washington hotel (winter 40-41) is

¹²⁴(...continued)

the basis of a mere suspicion that they intended to break with Stalin's dictatorship and remain abroad." His assassination passed unnoticed, quite unlike that of Reiss and Krivitsky, until an alarm was raised. His case showed that it didn't matter "how much time had elapsed since the refusal of an NKVD officer to return to the USSR, Stalin's men would sooner or later catch up with him and destroy him." A. Orlov, The Secret History of Stalin's Crimes, pp. 227-228, and Serge, "The Diary of Victor Serge" entry for Feb. 20, 1938, in The New International, Jan-Feb, 1950, pp. 54-55.

¹²⁵Erwin Wolf was one of Trotsky's secretaries in Norway. He had visited Serge in Brussels just prior to going to Spain. He told Serge he couldn't bear studying Marxism in comfort while a revolution was fighting for its life. Serge warned him he would be murdered. Wolf went anyway (Serge: "he had all the pugnacious confidence of youth"), was arrested, released and then kidnapped off the streets and disappeared. Serge, Memoirs, p. 337, and Victor Serge and Natalia Sedova Trotsky, The Life and Death of Leon Trotsky, New York, Basic Books, 1975, p. 225.

¹²⁶An excellent account of the murderous role of the NKVD in Spain can be found in Victor Alba and Stephen Schwartz, Spanish Marxism versus Soviet Communism: A History of the P.O.U.M., Transaction Books, New Brunswick and Oxford, 1988, especially chapters 6 & 7.

¹²⁷See Marc Zborowsky's [Etienne] testimony before Senator Eastland's Scope of Soviet Activity in the United States, hearings before the Subcommittee on Internal Security of the Committee on the Judiciary of the United States Senate, 85th Congress, in the Session held on February 14 and 15, 1957, part 51, and Alexander Orlov's testimony before the same Committee, especially p. 3464.

known as well as all the details of the affair... The 'suicide' version however remains quasi-official."¹²⁸

The role of the Comintern, the Communist Parties and their press, and fellow travelers in this period is notorious. For most of the people in and around the Communist Parties, the official line on the purges emanating from Moscow became an article of faith: the camps didn't exist, only counter-revolutionaries were being killed, the Moscow Trials were not fabrications, Trotsky and the Oppositionists really were counter-revolutionary agents¹²⁹ of the Gestapo, the Mikado, the OVRA, the Okhrana, labeled 'super-Judas', 'lubricious viper,' 'bloodthirsty dogs'¹³⁰, and worse. Krivitsky wrote that the "Western world never quite realized that Soviet show trials were no trials at all, and were nothing but weapons of political warfare."¹³¹ Serge nonetheless undertook with Sedov the task of refutation. He commented that he and Sedov "often felt like

¹²⁸Serge, Carnets, p. 89. French original: "X. arrive de N.Y. m'assure confidentiellement que le nom de l'agent du Guepeou qui assassina Walter Krivitsky dans un hotel de Washington (hiver 40-41) est con nu de meme que tous les details de l'affaire... La version du 'suicide' demeure cependant quasi officielle." English translation by John Manson, forthcoming.

¹²⁹Serge quoted a telegraph communication from old Chinese workers in China declaring, "Trotsky is a dog! We love great Stalin as our first born, as our dear father, wipe out these monsters!" Victor Serge, Seize Fusilles: Ou va la Revolution Russe?, Spartacus, Paris, p. 24. Original French: "... on communique que les vieux ouvriers chinois Chi-Gang-Li et Dzian-Liang-Siay declarent: 'Trotsky est un chien! ... Nous aimons notre grand Staline comme un fils premier-ne, comme un pere cheri... ecrasez ces monstres!'"

¹³⁰No charge was too fantastic for Izvestia or Pravda to print, and these were duly repeated in Communist Party organs in the West. In a long article "La Troisieme proces de Moscou," Serge listed the charges against Trotsky and the Oppositionists, and the reaction to these by the Stalinists in France. Published in La Revolution proletarienne, March 10, 1938.

¹³¹Krivitsky, pp. 187-188.

voices crying in the wilderness."¹³² Prominent intellectual leftists who had access to the truth chose to ignore it: Serge wrote to Romain Rolland, who had interceded on his behalf just months before. Rolland had promised Serge he would intervene if blood were shed, yet he chose to remain silent, as did Georges Duhamel and Henri Sellie.¹³³ These same men asked Serge to explain the mystery of the confession, and Serge shouted back,

"You then, give me an explanation of the conscience shown by the famous intellectuals and Western party-leaders who swallow it all -- the killing, the nonsense, the cult of the Leader, the democratic Constitution whose authors are promptly shot!"¹³⁴

Serge visited Andre Gide after he returned from his famous visit to Russia to discuss the current situation and the fate of socialism. Before Gide went to Russia, Serge had published an open letter addressed to Gide in La Revolution proletarienne (May 1936),¹³⁵ which was an appeal for Gide to keep his eyes wide open in Moscow. This open letter had caused a lot of consternation in France, and may have been the reason that Serge's relatives in the USSR were locked up.

Gide was profoundly saddened by what he saw in the Soviet Union and somewhat cast adrift politically. He was no longer the man who appeased Malraux at the International Writers Congress in Paris in 1935, speaking of the importance of demonstrating confidence and love for the Soviet Union and making its security the most important task for European intellectuals.¹³⁶ Serge

¹³²Memoirs, p.331.

¹³³Ibid., p. 333-334.

¹³⁴Ibid.

¹³⁵Also published as "Pismo Viktora Serzha Andre Zhidu" in Byulleten' Oppozitsii, No. 51, 1936, pp. 9-11.

¹³⁶The account of Gide's actions at the Congress can be found in Herbert Lottman, The Left Bank: Writers, Artists, and Politics from the Popular Front to the Cold War, (Boston, 1982) p. 95.

wrote in his Diary (entry for end of November 1936) after his visit with Gide that he had just learned that his sister, sister-in-law and brother-in-law were arrested on September 6, the day after the execution of Zinoviev, Kamenev, and Smirnov, and Serge believed they were arrested because of Serge's writings, especially his open letters. Serge discussed the meaning of the wave of terror in the Soviet Union with Gide, and the "impotence of intellectuals." He stressed: "A person can free himself, however, from moral complicity."¹³⁷ Few did.

As the wave of terror intensified in Moscow and spread to Spain, the 'progressive' press outdid itself in doublespeak and outright calumny. Serge watched his Spanish comrades being shot in the back as they faced Franco's army, while the Communist press denounced the POUMistas as "Trotskyists, spies, agents of Franco-Hitler-Mussolini, enemies of the people." How was it possible? According to Serge:

"The average man, who cannot conceive that lying on this scale is possible, is taken unawares by stupendous, unexpected assertions. Outrageous language intimidates him and goes some way to excuse his deception: reeling under the shock, he is tempted to tell himself that there must, after all, be some justification of a higher order passing his own understanding. Success is possible for these techniques, it seems clear, only in epochs of confusion, and only if the brave minorities who embody the critical spirit are effectively gagged or reduced to impotence through reasons of State and their own lack of material resources.

In any case, it was not a matter of persuasion: it was, fundamentally, a matter of murder. [my emphasis] One of the intentions behind the campaign of drive initiated in the Moscow Trials was to make any discussion between official and oppositional Communists quite impossible. Totalitarianism has no more dangerous enemy than the spirit of criticism,

¹³⁷ "Pages from the Diary of Victor Serge," in The New International, September 1949, pp. 214-216. As to the relatives Serge mentioned, his brother-in-law Paul Marcel spent six years in prison, and his sister-in-law Esther Russakova died in a camp. (Interview with Irina Gogua, Moscow, March 1989.) Nothing is known about his sister Vera Vladimirovna Frolova.

which it bends every effort to exterminate. Any reasonable objection is bundled away with shouts, and the objector himself, if he persists, is bundled off on a stretcher to the mortuary. I have met my assailants face to face in public meetings, offering to answer any question they raised. Instead they always strove to drown my voice in storms of insults, delivered at the tops of their voices. My books, rigorously documented, and written with the sole passionate aim of uncovering the truth, have been translated for publication in Poland, Britain the US, Argentina, Chile, and Spain. In none of these places has a single line ever been contested, or a single argument adduced in reply: only abuse, denunciation and threats. Both in Paris and in Mexico there were moments when in certain cafes people discussed my forthcoming assassination quite as a matter of course."¹³⁸

Talk of Serge's assassination was not idle chatter. Etienne, (Marc Zborowski) the NKVD agent in the Paris Left Opposition circles, who was complicit in the deaths of Trotskyists in Europe, also had plans for Serge that were interrupted by the war.¹³⁹

5.9 The tentacles of the NKVD in Europe: Serge and Reiss, Krivitsky, Barmine, Sedov, Zborowsky -- The Web of Blackness Extends

By 1937, the 'Great Terror' was in full force and a truly enormous witchhunt engulfed the Soviet Union. The atmosphere of sheer terror spread beyond the borders and reached a fanatical intensity in the circles of Soviet agents abroad, as well as in Oppositionist circles. Elsa Poretsky captured the atmosphere in Moscow 1937 in the chilling account of her winter visit. All

¹³⁸ Serge, Memoirs, p. 338.

¹³⁹ Alba and Schwartz, loc. cit. p. 221. Schwartz has written a series of controversial articles in the New York Review of Books and elsewhere on 'Stalin's Killerati' and said he found evidence that there was an NKVD 'hit list' and after Sedov's name was that of Sneevliet and Serge. Interview with Stephen Schwartz, April 1989, San Francisco. Sneevliet was killed by the Nazis in 1942. Serge's son Vlady still questions the 'natural causes' that took his father at age 57.

real contact with friends and neighbors was reduced to a superficial minimum, to avoid possible denunciation from others recently repressed. Whenever the phone rang, everyone froze. People took myriad precautions to avoid attention and association with others whose position, marital connections or former political experience marked them for repression. Poretsky wrote that "Stalin had succeeded in doing something the Tsars had never done. The terror had destroyed the bonds of humanity and had made those who were directly affected go on living in a void, accept this void, and create it around themselves."¹⁴⁰

The atmosphere of anxiety and dread, of distrust and fear is captured only too well in both Krivitsky's and Serge's accounts. Serge wrote "Black was the spring of 1937 the tragedies of Russia once more cast their peculiar stupor over the world."¹⁴¹ Agents were everywhere, and even agents were in danger. Both Reiss and Krivitsky belonged to a group of NKVD agents who were dedicated Communists, who were sickened by the murders and crimes committed in the name of socialism.¹⁴² Reiss resolved to break with the NKVD and tried to convince his boyhood friend Walter Krivitsky to break with him. The NKVD decided to test Krivitsky's loyalty: knowing in advance of Reiss' defection, they assigned to Krivitsky the liquidation of

¹⁴⁰Elisabeth Poretsky, Our Own People, pp. 183-203.

¹⁴¹Serge, Memoirs, p. 340.

¹⁴²Their stories are well documented in Elsa Poretsky, Our Own People, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1969, Walter Krivitsky, In Stalin's Secret Service (Published in Britain under the title I Was Stalin's Agent), Harper and Brothers, New York and London, 1939, Isaac Deutscher, The Prophet Outcast, Trotsky: 1929-1940, Victor Serge, Memoirs, Carnets, L'Assassinat d'Ignace Reiss (With Rosmer and Wullens), Alba and Schwartz, Spanish Marxism versus Soviet Communism, Pierre Broue, Trotsky (pp. 868-), Zborowsky, Lola Dallin, and Alexander Orlov, Scope of Soviet Activities in the US, Hearings, Kyril Khenkin, [Soviet agent in Paris and Spain] author of L'Espionnage sovietique, Paris, 1981.

his close friend. Krivitsky refused and was from that day forward a marked man.

Ludwik had been mulling over the break for some time. He "clung to his job, the only one he considered worth doing, of supplying republican Spain with weapons."¹⁴³ He met his friend Louis Fischer, and told him of his revulsion with the Stalinist regime, which was destroying the old revolutionists and with them, the revolution.¹⁴⁴ He tried to warn the Oppositionists in Paris that their actions were being monitored and that they were in danger. Ludwik let them know that "a decision to use terror against the opposition abroad -- against us -- has been taken."¹⁴⁵ Serge published the "Ludwig Warning" in an article of the same name. At the same time, Sneevliet, Serge and Sedov wanted a public statement from Reiss that would "permit us to have confidence in him and [would] put him under the protection of public opinion."¹⁴⁶

Krivitsky met with Ludwik, and surreptitiously let him know that his new mission, the reason he was allowed to leave Moscow, was to bring Ludwik back. Ludwik decided it was time to break, but was not able to persuade Krivitsky to break with him. Ludwik-Poretsky-Reiss¹⁴⁷ contacted Sneevliet, because according to Elsa Poretsky, he could trust him completely. They arranged

¹⁴³Poretsky, p. 210.

¹⁴⁴Louis Fischer, Men and Politics: An Autobiography, Jonathan Cape, London, 1941. pp. 479-482.

¹⁴⁵Serge, "Reiss, Krivitsky, Bastich Others, Dec. 1937, in "The Diary of Victor Serge," The New International, January-February 1950, p. 51.

¹⁴⁶Ibid.

¹⁴⁷Ludwik was Ignace S. Poretsky's pseudonym. Reiss was a remote family name he used once he broke with the NKVD because his wife Elsa was certain the name was unknown in Moscow. She and Sneevliet then decided to use this name for the body of 'Hans Eberhard' and it is by this name that Ignace Poretsky has since been known. Poretsky, p. 241.

to meet, in order to prepare the publicity of Ludwik's break. Sneevliet tried to persuade Ludwik to make his break public, before letting the Soviets know, but Ludwik-Poretsky-Reiss believed he should first notify the CC of the CPSU. This was his mistake, because it gave the NKVD time to assassinate him before the story broke in the West. The Trotskyists were right that Reiss' only protection would be to ask the police for protection, and to go for maximum publicity.¹⁴⁸ Nonetheless Poretsky delayed making public his open letter for one week, time enough to let the Soviets know first. He ended his letter by declaring for the Fourth International.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁸Later Trotsky would write that Reiss' death was "not only a loss, but a lesson": Reiss should have gone public, but so too should the Left Oppositionists in Europe have established connections with him in time so that Reiss would not have had to break alone with Stalin's enormous spy apparatus. Trotsky again stressed that "the sole serious defense against the hired murderers of Stalin is complete publicity." Leon Trotsky, "A Tragic Lesson," September 21, 1937, in Trotsky, Writings [1936-1937], pp. 448-451.

¹⁴⁹Poretsky-Reiss sent his open letter to the CC of the CPSU via the Soviet Embassy in Paris. The letter was wrapped in the Order of the Red Banner he had earned in 1927. Of course one does not resign from the Soviet Secret Police, as he well knew. His open letter declared:

"Up to this moment I marched alongside you. Now I will not take another step. Our paths diverge! He who now keeps quiet becomes Stalin's accomplice, betrays the working class, betrays socialism. I have been fighting for socialism since my twentieth year. Now on the threshold of my fortieth I do not want to live off the favours of a Yezhov. The day when international socialism will judge the crimes committed in the past ten years is not far off. Nothing will be forgotten and nothing will be forgiven. History is harsh. 'The leader of genius,' the 'Father of the People,' the 'Sun of socialism' will have to account for what he has done. He will have to account for the defeated Chinese revolution, for the red plebiscite in Germany, for the defeat of the German proletariat, for social fascism.... the international workers' movement will rehabilitate ... the Kamenevs, the Mrachkovskys, the Smirnovs, ...

(continued...)

Poretzsky's wife insisted in her book that Sneevliet told Ludwik he would meet him alone. Serge wrote in his Memoirs that Reiss "asked to see us ... we arranged to meet him in Rheims on 5 September 1937."¹⁵⁰ In his Diary entry for Dec. 1937, Serge wrote that at first the meeting was to be between Ludwik, Sneevliet, Sedov and Serge. Sedov was sick and could not attend the meeting. Serge and Sneevliet went to Rheims on the appointed day, waited at the station buffet, but Reiss did not appear. They wandered through the town, still did not find Ludwik, and after two days decided to return to Paris. Waiting for the return train, Serge read in a newspaper that the previous day a Czech by the name of Eberhard's¹⁵¹ bullet ridden body had been picked up on the road to Chamblandes, in the pocket was a railway ticket to Rheims. He had a clump of grey hair in his hands, belonging to the pathetic Gertrude Schildbach, a woman Ludwik had befriended and recruited, and who was now used by the NKVD to murder "the only friend she ever had, a man she

¹⁴⁹(...continued)

Okudzhavas, Rakovskys and Andreas Nins -- the spies and enemy agents the saboteurs and the Gestapo agents.!what is needed today is a fight without mercy against Stalinism! [For] The class struggle and not the popular front, workers' intervention in the Spanish revolution as opposed to the action of committees. Down with the lie of socialism in one country! Return to Lenin's international! I intend to devote my feeble forces to the cause of Lenin. I want to continue the fight, for only our victory -- that of the proletarian revolution -- will free humanity of capitalism and the USSR of Stalinism. Forward to new struggle! For the Fourth International!"

Poretzsky, Our Own People, pp. 1-3.

¹⁵⁰Serge, Memoirs, p. 342.

¹⁵¹One of the identities Reiss-Poretzsky used in Europe was of the Czech Hans Eberhard. Poretzsky, p. 235-236.

worshipped, respected and obeyed,"¹⁵² "the only human being who had shown her consideration."¹⁵³

Serge and Sneevliet immediately understood that Eberhard was Reiss, and drew up a press release giving his real identity. The French press chose to remain silent. The story was finally published after Serge paid a visit to Gaston Bergery¹⁵⁴ of La Fleche who broke the story.¹⁵⁵ Reiss' murder was subsequently splashed all over the European press. Krivitsky wrote that "it had become a celebrated case in Europe and reverberated in the press of America and throughout the world."¹⁵⁶ The Swiss and French investigation team were assisted by Sneevliet, Serge and Elsa Poretsky. Renata Steiner, a Swiss NKVD agent who had earlier infiltrated the Left Oppositionist circle in Paris, also gave the French police all the information needed to investigate Ludwik's death.

The record of the investigation was published by Pierre Tesne in Paris in a book entitled L'Assassinat d'Ignace Reiss. The authors were Victor Serge, Maurice Wullens, and Alfred Rosmer.¹⁵⁷ The identity of the assassins was finally established to be a group of people who were members of the Society for the Repatriation of Russian Emigres in Paris, a group sponsored by the Soviet Embassy. The assistant chief of the Foreign Division of the OGPU-NKVD, Mikhail Spiegelglass, had organized the crime, assisted by Beletsky, Grozovsky and Lydia Grozovskaya, all members of the Soviet commercial mission in

¹⁵²Poretsky, p. 241.

¹⁵³Poretsky, p. 236.

¹⁵⁴Serge, Memoirs, p. 343.

¹⁵⁵Serge, Diary entry, The New International, Jan-Feb. 1950, p. 52.

¹⁵⁶Krivitsky, p. 261.

¹⁵⁷L'Assassinat d'Ignace Reiss, Serge, Wullens and Rosmer, Les Humbles, avril 1938, Paris, 97 pages.

Paris.¹⁵⁸ The GPU agents operating in the Russian Emigre society had been spying on Leon Sedov and the Left Oppositionists in Paris, and had twice attempted to snare Sedov. One of their agents, a man named Semirensky, had taken a room next to Sedov's and was working with Renata Steiner to trap Trotsky's son and collaborator.¹⁵⁹

The investigation of Reiss' murder lasted many months and led to the arrest of Renata Steiner, Etienne Martignat and Abbiat-Rossi, all Paris agents of the NKVD. In a rather bizarre incongruity, the Soviets made use of an organization founded by former Tsarist officers and other white Russian emigres as a center for its espionage activity in Europe.¹⁶⁰ That group was the Union of Repatriation of Russians Abroad, and it was to this group that Mordka Marc Zborowski, a young Polish medical student at Grenoble was recruited.

Zborowski, alias "Etienne," turned out to be the 'other' agent in the Paris Left Oppositionist circle who knew that Sneevliet and Serge were going to meet Ludwik-Reiss in Rheims. He notified the NKVD who used the information to circumvent the meeting by killing Reiss. They recruited Gertrude Schildbach, Renata Steiner et al to lure Reiss to his death in Lausanne,

¹⁵⁸Serge and Sedova Trotsky, op.cit. pp. 226.

¹⁵⁹Serge and Sedova, ibid.

¹⁶⁰General Alexander Orlov's secret letter to Trotsky warning him of the spy Zborowski in the Paris Left Opposition circle, reprinted in toto in Orlov's sworn testimony at the "Hearings Before the Subcommittee to Investigate the Administration of the Internal Security Act and other Internal Security Laws of the Committee on the Judiciary, United States Senate, 85th Congress, First Session on Scope of Soviet Activity in the United States, Feb. 14-15, 1957", part 51, pp. 3425-3426. Poretsky described the White Russian emigration as consisting of several groups who quarreled among themselves but were united in their aim of overthrowing Communism in Russia. It was an easy group for the NKVD to recruit from, and all the White Russian groups were delighted with Stalin's "liquidation of the revolution." Poretsky, op.cit. pp. 237-238.

while a second team of assassins was reserved for Rheims in case the first team failed.¹⁶¹ His family was also meant to be killed, but at the last minute, Schildbach proved incapable of giving strychnine-laced chocolates to Poretsky's child.¹⁶² The box of poisoned candy was later found in the Lausanne hotel room occupied by Schildbach and her companion Rossi.

Reiss left behind notes that Serge analyzed in the book Serge wrote with Rosmer and Wullens on the assassination. The important pieces of information, which also later showed up in Krivitsky's book, were that Stalin had been attempting secret negotiations with Hitler since at least 1934, and on the eve of agreement with Hitler in 1937, Stalin executed his general staff. He also found evidence that despite the defeat of the Left Opposition and the ascent of Stalin's murderous policies, Leningrad Communists had gone to their death shouting "Long Live Leon Davidovich!"¹⁶³, and that Stalin was attempting to get a trial against Trotsky going in Western Europe (the attempted Grylewicz frameup¹⁶⁴ in Czechoslovakia), and yet another in North America.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶¹Lilia Dallin's testimony to the Hearing before the Subcommittee to Investigate the Administration of the Internal Security Act and other Internal Security laws of the Committee on the Judiciary, U.S. Senate, 84th Congress, Second Session on Scope of Soviet Activity in the U.S., Feb. 29, 1956, Part 4. Mrs. Dallin cited her source as the French and Swiss police reports.

¹⁶²Poretsky, p. 234.

¹⁶³Rosmer, Serge, Wullens, p. 19.

¹⁶⁴Anton Grylewicz was a former Reichstag deputy who set up a committee in Prague to investigate the Moscow Trials. After a GPU intrigue in which Stalin is reported to have taken a personal interest, Grylewicz, a political refugee from Nazi Germany, was arrested and deported from Czechoslovakia as an undesirable alien. Serge and Sedova, p. 220.

¹⁶⁵Rosmer. Serge, Wullens, L'Assassinat d'Ignace Reiss, Les Humbles, Paris, Avril 1938. Everyone of Serge's findings after
(continued...)

A few weeks after Reiss's death two more agents came out of the closet: Alexander Barmine, and Walter Krivitsky. Zborowski was assigned to report on both of them to the NKVD.¹⁶⁶ Barmine was an NKVD agent stationed in Athens. He had fought in the Civil War and belonged to the revolutionary generation of Bolsheviks. In Moscow Barmine was married to Irina Gogua, the daughter of Serge's half-sister Julia.¹⁶⁷

Like Reiss and Krivitsky, Barmine was utterly sickened by Stalin's murderous activities. He handed in his resignation

¹⁶⁵ (...continued)

examining Reiss' notes were confirmed in Krivitsky's book I Was Stalin's Agent, p. 151, pp. 168-173.

Krivitsky had heard about the Grylewicz affair as part of an attempt by the GPU to convince the world of the truth of the Moscow trials by getting similar trials going in Spain, Czechoslovakia and the United States. The idea was to link the POUM in Spain, and Grylewicz (a Trotskyist) in Czechoslovakia, to Franco and Hitler. The attempt failed. In New York the OGPU laid plans for a "Trotskyist-Fascist" trial through an intrigue that would prove American anti-Stalinists were agents of Hitler's Gestapo. This effort led to the disappearance of American Communist Julia Poyntz and the arrest of the American Soviet agents Donald Robinson-Rubens and his wife in Moscow, but the effort fell flat, and not much more is known. The real story won't emerge until the KGB archives are opened. Krivitsky, pp. 168-172.

¹⁶⁶ Zborowski's testimony on the Scope of Soviet Activity in the United States, March 2, 1956, Washington D.C., United States Senate, Subcommittee to Investigate the Administration of the Internal Security Act. Zborowski was accompanied by his attorney, Herman A. Greenberg, and this was the first question he answered in this session.

¹⁶⁷ Interview with Irina Gogua, March 1989, Moscow. Gogua's mother Julia had been the object of Stalin's affection in 1902 in Georgia, and later married Kalistrat Gogua, a prominent Menshevik, and early friend of Djughashvili. Irina was Barmine's first wife, and they remained friends until Irina's arrest in 1934. Barmine described Irina, Julia, Gorky's wife Ekaterina Peshkova, (Julia's best friend -- see Orenburg chapter infra), but failed to admit he married Irina and only described them as close friends. Was he trying to protect her in the gulag? (Barmine, pp. 265-266.) He lost contact of her after her arrest, and she learned of his death in 1987 from me in Moscow, March 1989. Irina Gogua died over New Year, 1989-90, in Moscow.

from the NKVD, and ironically it arrived in Moscow in the same post as Reiss' open letter. Thus, according to Barmine, the GPU agents in Europe were

"simultaneously confronted with a double job of 'liquidation.' They could not find me, and so they dealt with the Reiss case first, an accident that probably saved my life. For their organization was now temporarily disrupted, and they were compelled to send the compromised agents into hiding and assemble a new gang." ¹⁶⁸

Barmine was still pursued, but managed to survive. In fact, he was the only NKVD agent in Europe to openly break with Stalin who died a natural death, in the United States in 1987. ¹⁶⁹ His book, aptly titled One Who Survived, is a remarkable memoir, which Max Eastman described as "the most important that could be written on the socialist experiment in Russia." ¹⁷⁰

The book was actually ghost-written by Victor Serge. Every night Serge met Barmine at the police-guarded home of the French Socialist Marceau Pivert and took down his story. There is no indication in the published version that it was in fact written by Serge, but Serge's son Vlady has confirmed it, and was

¹⁶⁸ Alexander Barmine, One Who Survived: The Life Story of a Russian under the Soviets, G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1945.

¹⁶⁹ I learned of his death from the obituary in the New York Times. Barmine lived in Connecticut, and had worked for the CIA in the 50s and 60s. Alexander Orlov, another NKVD agent marked for 'recall' eluded his executioners and made it to the US, where he wrote a letter to Stalin, detailing all Stalin's crimes and telling Stalin that if he (Orlov) were murdered, his lawyer would publish Orlov's testimony. Although Orlov was pursued for 14 years, he survived and died naturally in 1973. Zborowski was a European NKVD agent who died a natural death in 1989, but he never broke with Stalin, though he asserted that after 1945, he took no assignments from the NKVD. See Alexander Orlov, The Secret History of Stalin's Crimes, Random House, 1953, pp.x-xvi, and Zborowski's testimony to the Senate Committee on the Scope of Soviet Activities in the United States, Feb. 29, 1956, Part 4.

¹⁷⁰ Max Eastman, Introduction to Barmine's book, op. cit., p. xi.

present for some of the sessions. Barmine dictated his experience, and Serge gave it literary form. Serge reviewed the book in an article entitled "Le temoignage d'Alexandre Barmine" published in La Wallonie, 4-5 mars 1939. In this review Serge proclaimed that "there is no man in the world who will stand up and say: 'This is not true.'" ¹⁷¹ Barmine later confessed to Max Eastman that during these writing sessions, he felt as though he were "walking in a graveyard. All my friends and life associates have been shot. It seems to be some kind of a mistake that I am alive." ¹⁷²

What is also incredible is how small the circle of the surviving revolutionary generation really was. Serge knew all of them in the Soviet Union and abroad, and wrote their remarkable stories in his book on Reiss, and Barmine's memoir. That he was also related by marriage to Barmine, that at meetings in Paris Krivitsky and Elsa Poretsky could remember meetings with Serge in Moscow, attests to the small size of what Joseph Berger called the 'shipwrecked generation.'

The other agent to break was Walter Krivitsky and it is here that we pick up the story of Serge, Sneevliet, Sedov, Poretsky, Krivitsky and Etienne/Zborowsky. After her husband's murder, Elsa Poretsky went to Amsterdam to stay with the Sneevliets. She traveled with them to Paris, where Sneevliet had arranged several interviews with her. When Serge came to interview Poretsky, Sneevliet told her she would be glad to meet him. She wrote that "Serge was the last person in the world I wanted to see" and worse, he did not come alone. He brought a young friend of Sedov's with him, who introduced himself as

¹⁷¹"Personne ne se levera dans le monde pour dire a ce temoin: 'Ceci n'est pas vrai.'" Serge, "Le temoignage d'Alexandre Barmine," La Wallonie, 4-5 Mars 1939, p. 14. Barmine's book was first published in France and Britain, under the title Memoirs of a Soviet Diplomat.

¹⁷²Max Eastman, Introduction to Barmine, op. cit., p. xi.

Friedman, but who in reality was Marc Zborowsky. Zborowsky was known as "Etienne" to the Trotskyists and was Sedov's secretary and assistant. According to Poretsky, Sneevliet was furious with Serge, and Serge was 'visibly embarrassed." Poretsky wrote:

"The fact that [Serge] had passed on to Etienne the highly confidential word that I was in Paris, and worse, had brought Etienne with him to the hotel, gave Sneevliet a shock that never wore off. ... Serge's natural curiosity had made him keep seeing all kinds of people, party members, ex-party members, former anarchists, every kind of oppositionist, until the very day he was arrested, in Leningrad in 1933. Some considered this showed courage, others irresponsibility. It was probably a bit of both, but carrying on as he did exposed others as well as himself to danger. ... More baffling still was the fact that Serge had managed to come out of the Soviet Union in 1936. We continued to have doubts about him."¹⁷³

Poretsky added that Serge's account of this meeting was different than her own, and in a quite vicious sleight of hand, explained that Serge himself "was not a professional conspirator, he was essentially a writer." She then quoted completely out of context something Serge had written in the Memoirs about Soviet "writers in uniform" in the period in which writers were increasingly constrained. Poretsky took it as a self description for Serge:

"Poets and novelists are not political beings, because they are not essentially rational The artist ... is always delving for his raw material in the subconscious ... If the novelist's characters are truly alive...they eventually take their author by surprise."¹⁷⁴

Serge was to commit one further error in Elsa Poretsky's mind to cement her impression of him as a careless, if courageous, non-professional. This involved a letter Elsa Poretsky received in October 1937 signed 'Krusia,' and thereafter known as the 'Krusia letter.' Krusia was the name of

¹⁷³Poretsky, pp. 244-246.

¹⁷⁴Poretsky, p. 246, quoting from Serge, Memoirs, p. 265.

a woman both Ludwik and Krivitsky had known in their young days as Bolshevik revolutionaries. Elsa Poretsky immediately knew that this meant Krivitsky had broken with the NKVD and was trying to reach her. Elsa did not want to meet or help Krivitsky, as she felt "Ludwik's blood" was between them now. But Sneevliet persuaded her that Krivitsky was important and she was the link to their meeting him.

According to Poretsky, the meeting took place at Gerard Rosenthal's office (he was Trotsky's French lawyer and has written a book, Avocat de Trotsky) with Poretsky, Krivitsky, Sedov, Sneevliet, Rosenthal, and Pierre Naville. Serge was not there according to Poretsky, though in the Memoirs and his diary, Carnets, Serge placed himself at the meeting which he described as taking place on the 11th of November at Gerard's law office which adjoins his father's doctor's office near the Gare St.-Lazare, with himself, Sneevliet, Elsa Poretsky, Sedov, Gerard Rosenthal and Krivitsky. Serge did not name Naville at the meeting.

During the meeting Krivitsky repeated Reiss' warning to Sedov, Sneevliet and Serge, that there was an agent in their midst and assassinations were planned. He would not name the agent, which infuriated Sneevliet. He did cast suspicion on Victor Serge, and later, in a report drawn up for Trotsky, Krivitsky flatly accused Serge of being the agent, while Poretsky reported to Trotsky that she believed Serge had acted irresponsibly and had been used by an agent. The accusation that Serge was the agent led Isaac Deutscher to write:

"No one was, of course, less suited to act such a part than Serge. He was one of Trotsky's early adherents, a gifted and generous, though politically ingenuous, man of letters. The worst that might be said of him was that he had a foible for vainglorious chatter and that this was a grave fault in a member of an organization which had to guard its secrets from the GPU. In any case suspicion began to cling indiscriminately to anyone, even to Lyova himself, while the actual agent provocateur went on collecting and reading Trotsky's mail, shared all of Lyova's

secrets, and used his wiles to keep his own reputation clear by casting distrust upon others."¹⁷⁵

Sneevliet was enraged that Krivitsky refused to name the agent in their midst, certain that Krivitsky was lying when he insisted he did not know the agent's name. It is probable that Krivitsky spoke the truth about not knowing the agent's name, because as Zborowsky himself later attested, "an agent is never told about another unless they are supposed to work together."¹⁷⁶ After the meeting, Krivitsky was assigned a bodyguard by Sedov, none other than Marc Zborowsky.¹⁷⁷ Had he known Zborowsky was the agent, Krivitsky would most likely have exposed him then and there, to save his own skin. Krivitsky went on meeting Sedov nearly every day,¹⁷⁸ and met Serge several times as well.

At the meeting held in Gerard Rosenthal's office, Krivitsky told Elsa Poretsky that the 'Krusia letter,' which he had sent her care of Rosenthal, had been shown him by the NKVD who had it in their hands before it reached Amsterdam. This convinced Krivitsky that there was a dangerous agent in Sedov's circle, and that Krivitsky had to go into hiding. When Krivitsky then demanded to know how this letter got into the hands of the NKVD, Rosenthal answered, "I gave it to Victor Serge to post to Amsterdam."¹⁷⁹ Krivitsky could not understand why Rosenthal would show this letter to Serge, and Elsa Poretsky could not

¹⁷⁵ Isaac Deutscher, The Prophet Outcast Trotsky: 1929-1940, pp. 391-392. Deutscher cited Lyova's letters to his father of 19 November 1937 and Trotsky's letter to Lyova on 22 January 1938, and Etienne's correspondence to Trotsky in the Harvard Archives.

¹⁷⁶ Poretsky, p. 274.

¹⁷⁷ Zborowsky's sworn testimony to Senator Eastland's Committee on the Scope of Soviet Activities in the United States, Feb. 29, 1956, Part 4.

¹⁷⁸ Krivitsky, p. 267.

¹⁷⁹ Poretsky, pp. 252-254.

understand why Serge would have shown it to someone else before posting it. Poretsky believed that Sneevliet went straight from that meeting and confronted Serge with showing the 'Krusia letter' to someone else, and that is how Serge was able to so vividly describe the meeting, as if he were there. Serge's account mentions nothing of the 'Krusia letter.'

For Sneevliet, this discovery confirmed in his mind that Etienne-Zborowsky -- "that little Polish Jew" -- was the agent, that is that the secretary and right-hand man of Sedov's was the NKVD agent. Although suspicion was now cast on Etienne, it took another 20 years for him to be exposed. Poretsky also believed that Sneevliet did not mention Serge's indiscretion further in order to shield him, and protect himself from Trotsky's ire, no doubt because he was thinking of "the things he had told Serge and the careless way Serge bandied everything about."¹⁸⁰ Sneevliet and the other Dutch Trotskyists, as well as Serge, were already becoming distanced from Trotsky and the French Trotskyists, and this too probably prevented his pressing the investigation of Etienne-Zborowsky.

According to Zborowsky, Serge thought the agent in their midst was Sedov's female secretary Lola Paulsen/Lilia Ginzburg Estrine, and Zborowsky himself threatened to break Serge's neck if he didn't stop spreading that rumor, even though it deflected attention from himself.¹⁸¹ Zborowsky informed Serge that the French Left Oppositionists refused to discuss the substance of the allegations against Lola, and from then on Serge was practically excluded from the group.

¹⁸⁰Poretsky, p. 255.

¹⁸¹Poretsky, p. 274. Serge himself did not write of his suspicions. Deutsch, op cit, p.408, wrote that following Klement's death, Serge openly voiced his suspicion of Etienne as the NKVD agent in their midst, and Etienne worriedly asked Trotsky what to do about it. Trotsky replied that Serge and Sneevliet should lay their charges before a competent commission, but Deutsch continued, Trotsky himself did not believe the accusation.

Serge was not the only one to raise the possibility that Lola Dallin, nee Lilia Ginzburg, was an agent. The FBI file I obtained on Victor Serge through the FOIA has appended to it several pages on Lola Dallin, Marc Zborowsky, and Boris Nicolaevsky, as if to say the FBI connects them to Serge. So much is deleted from the files that it is not clear why they are appended, though in the case of Lola Dallin, the FBI has only partially deleted a section entitled "Suspicious Directed Towards Subject as Possible NKVD Agent."¹⁸²

Further, Gen. Alexander Orlov tried to warn Trotsky through a letter he wrote pretending to be a Russian Jew with a close relative in the GPU. He sent the letter on 28 Dec. 1938, and warned Trotsky of the agent in their circle in Paris, whose name was Marc. He gave other details that unmistakably identified Zborowsky.¹⁸³ Lola Dallin was visiting Trotsky in Mexico when he received Orlov's unsigned letter, and she was made uncomfortable by the wealth of unpleasant detail in the letter. She told Trotsky,

"'That is certainly a definitely dirty job of the NKVD, who 'wants to deprive you of your few collaborators that you have in France.' And at the same time, he had another letter from another unnamed agent, telling him that a woman, meaning me, is coming to visit him, and will poison him. So we both decided, 'See how they work? They want that you shall break with the only people that are left, over in France, Russians, let us say, in France in Paris.' And we decided that it isn't to be taken seriously, but it was a hoax of the NKVD."

¹⁸² FBI Secret Files, Internal Security Act of 1950, titled "Lydia Dallin, aka: Mrs. David J. Dallin, nee Lilia Ginzberg, was: Lilia Estrin, Lilly Estrin, Lola Estrin, Mrs. Samuel Estrin, 5/23/56, 3 pages, #240, 376.

¹⁸³ Orlov's Testimony to Senate Committee on Scope of Soviet Activities, pp. 3423-3429.

And, Lilia Dallin, added, the first thing she did upon her return to Paris was tell Zborowski everything.¹⁸⁴ Trotsky wrote an extremely confidential letter to the Paris comrades repeating Orlov's allegations, and demanding that they investigate the allegations and shadow the 'stool pigeon's' movements.¹⁸⁵ Trotsky did hypothesize that the letter he received could have been planted by the GPU to "spread demoralization" through their ranks.¹⁸⁶ Did Lilia Dallin circumvent the investigation by what she told Zborowski and the comrades? Finally, when Sedov was taken ill, it was Lilia Dallin that suggested Sedov go to the Mirabeau clinic run by White Russian emigres, as she had a sister-in-law physician working there.¹⁸⁷ The evidence on Lilia Dallin is not conclusive. It appears that she was a loyal friend to Zborowsky until she discovered he was an agent in 1954, rather than an agent herself.

The atmosphere of suspicion was such that it provoked even more divisiveness among groups that were already rife with political discord. They were not paranoid to be on guard for agents since they were actually being infiltrated, and comrades were being murdered. However, agent-baiting in a small organization through casting suspicion on anyone could be just as ruinous to political effectiveness as actually planting an

¹⁸⁴ Testimony of Lilia Dallin, Senator Eastland's Subcommittee on the Scope of Soviet Activities in the United States, Feb. 29, 1956, Part 4.

¹⁸⁵ There is no evidence this inquiry was ever carried out, and Georges Vereeken, a Belgian Trotskyist close to Sneevliet and Serge at the time has since written a book attacking the Fourth International for not having carried out the investigation which could have unmasked Zborowsky before he completed his murderous work. See Georges Vereeken, The GPU in the Trotskyist Movement, London, New Park Publications 1976.

¹⁸⁶ Leon Trotsky, "A GPU Stool Pigeon in Paris," January 1, 1939, signed "Van," in Leon Trotsky, Writings, Supplement 1934-1940, Pathfinder Press, New York, 1979, pp. 818-819.

¹⁸⁷ Broue, Trotsky, p. 876.

agent in their midst. This was an added boon for Stalin. The result was that the Left Opposition in Paris was hopelessly divided and so consumed with their internal problems that their political influence was compromised.

Even though Krivitsky believed Serge was the agent, he continued to meet him in Paris, and Serge noted how nervous, shriveled, and frightened he was. Others also described Krivitsky in similar terms, and he was probably on guard in Serge's presence, since he believed Serge was an agent. Serge was also nervous: he wrote that whenever Krivitsky put his hand in his pocket to get a cigarette, Serge likewise put his hand in his own pocket.¹⁸⁸

There has never been any confirmation that Serge shared the 'Krusia letter' with Zborowski. Poretsky asked Zborowski in 1954 if Serge had showed it to him, and he simply shrugged his shoulders, neither confirmation nor denial. I repeatedly tried to ask Zborowski that question, by letter, telephone, and a personal visit, in the years 1986-1988, without any success.¹⁸⁹ I did ask Pierre Broue, who knew Elsa Bernaut (Poretsky) and who was responsible for convincing her to write her memoir, why she was so hard on Serge. He answered that as an agent herself she was naturally suspicious of Serge, who tended to be open and generous, and as an embittered woman, she was probably offended

¹⁸⁸Serge described his meetings with Krivitsky in the Memoirs, pp.343-345, Carnet, entry for Dec. 1937, in The New International, Jan-Feb. 1950, pp. 51-55.

¹⁸⁹SW to MZ, Oct. 22, 1986, July 26, 1987, April-2, 1988; numerous phone calls from Jan 1986 through September 1988. He never spoke more than three words to me, and then hung up. I went to his house in San Francisco on March 19, 1988 and was not allowed in. His wife Regina Zborowski was more cordial, and encouraged me to keep trying. According to Stephen Schwartz, however, she "watched over Zborowsky carefully, and prevented him from speaking to anyone." (Interview, Oct. 1989) Zborowski died in April 1989 at the age of 81.

by Serge's manner.¹⁹⁰ The truth will not be known until the KGB files on Stalin's most precious agent, Marc Zborowski, are opened to public scrutiny. I have obtained the FBI and American Intelligence agencies' enormously thick files on Zborowski through the Freedom of Information Act, but so much information has been 'legally' deleted by the FBI, that no new information can be ascertained.

This whole affair made the relations between Serge and Sedov more strained, while Zborowski continued his deadly work. Three months later, on February 16, 1938, Lyova Sedov died in Paris just eight days short of his 32nd birthday. The official cause of death was peritonitis following the removal of his appendix. He was taken to an unknown hospital by Zborowski and the whereabouts were kept secret. The hospital was run by White Russians, the surgeon, a former Chekist,¹⁹¹ had a record of several fatalities after relatively simple operations.

The circumstances of Sedov's death suggest ample opportunity for foul play. The inquest did not yield any evidence, however, and attributed Sedov's death to post-operational complications. The family demanded a new inquest, but again could not prove Sedov was killed by the GPU, which they all assumed. Right after calling the ambulance, Zborowski informed the GPU which hospital Sedov was going to,¹⁹² meaning the only ones who knew were the GPU, Zborowski and Jeanne Martin, Sedov's wife.

¹⁹⁰Interviews with Pierre Broue, Mexico City, May 1987, and Los Angeles, October 1989.

¹⁹¹The surgeon's name was Dr. Boris Girmounski. (Broue, p. 876.)

¹⁹²Deutscher, pp. 396-397. In Zborowski's testimony to the US Senate, he remembered informing the GPU, but was uncertain he had called the ambulance. He stated he that there were mysterious circumstances surrounding Sedov's death but he concurred with the final autopsy and post-mortem, which gave the cause of death as peritonitis. Scope of Soviet Activities, Zborowski testimony, Feb. 29, 1956, part 4.

Stephen Schwartz, the author of a controversial set of articles published in the New York Times Book Review, The New York Review of Books, Commentary and elsewhere on Stalin's "killerati," has attempted to trace the links between the NKVD assassins and prominent European intellectuals, specifically Max Eitingon, in Freud's inner circle. Schwartz also has connections in the CIA and was told by an agent "strictly off the record" that they had information that Sedov had been given a poisoned orange by Zborowski.¹⁹³ Another American intelligence officer, Guenther Reinhardt, FBI covert agent who posed as a journalist and was involved in the secret mission 'red stealth' to uncover Soviet secret work in the US, also wrote that the GPU "poisoned Sedov in Paris" in his book Crime Without Punishment.¹⁹⁴ Pierre Broue, in his recent biography of Trotsky, repeats the 'poisoned orange' story.¹⁹⁵ The whole story of Sedov's death cannot be told until the KGB archives are opened to public scrutiny.

Sedov's death was a terrible blow to the Trotskyist movement. Serge described the circumstances yet thought it possible he died of 'culpable negligence.'¹⁹⁶ Serge wrote an elegy to Sedov, the third of Trotsky's children to die, -- the fourth had disappeared in the gulag, -- in La Wallonie, "Mort d'un ami" (Feb. 26, 1938) in which he described Sedov's funeral, where the French Trotskyists, still divided, stood apart under separate banners. In the Memoirs, Serge sketched Sedov thus:

"Young, energetic, of a temperament at once gentle and resolute, he had live a hellish life. From his father

¹⁹³Interview with Stephen Schwartz, October 1989, San Francisco. The same information is cited in Schwartz' book, Spanish Marxism versus Soviet Communism, p.221.

¹⁹⁴Reinhardt, Crime Without Punishment: The Secret Soviet Terror Against America, Hermitage House, New York, 1952, p. 58n.

¹⁹⁵Pierre Broue, Trotsky, p. 876.

¹⁹⁶Serge, Memoirs, p. 345.

he inherited an eager intelligence, an absolute faith in revolution, and the utilitarian, intolerant political mentality of the Bolshevik generation that was now disappearing. More than once we had lingered until dawn in the streets of Montparnasse, labouring together to comb out the mad tangle of the Moscow Trials, pausing from time to time under a street lamp for one or other of us to exclaim aloud: 'We are in a labyrinth of utter madness!' Overworked, penniless, anxious for his father, he passed his whole life in that labyrinth."¹⁹⁷

Serge remembered shaking Rudolf Klement's hand at the funeral. Klement was a fanatically dedicated secretary of the Fourth International. Five months later, on July 13, 1938, he became the next victim of the NKVD. He was kidnapped from his apartment in Paris, with the meal still on the table.¹⁹⁸ Klement's decapitated torso was fished at out of the Seine at Meulan, his body cut to bits to prevent recognition.¹⁹⁹

The NKVD sponsored killings did not stop there, but grew monstrously in Spain during the civil war. Serge knew from Krivitsky and Reiss that the NKVD considered Spain their territory where they could act with impunity. Along with his old friends and Trotskyist comrades from the Dutch section, Serge mobilized to prevent the coming bloodbath, "scattering my futile warnings in the left-wing Socialist Press, as far as the United States itself."²⁰⁰ When his friend Andreu Nin fell into Soviet hands, Serge and the others did all they could to rescue him. A delegation of Serge's Spanish committee went to Spain to find Nin and were able to trace his last days before he was

¹⁹⁷ Serge, Ibid., p. 344.

¹⁹⁸ Serge, Carnet, p.44.

¹⁹⁹ Pierre Broue described Klement's disappearance in his Trotsky, p. 878. Georges Vereeken raised the possibility that Klement was killed because he knew who the agent was, or perhaps was an agent himself. See Vereeken, The GPU in the Trotskyist Movement, Chapter 17, "Rudolf Klement: an agent? Certainly a coward," New Park Publications, London, 1976, pp. 238-318.

²⁰⁰ Serge, Memoirs, p. 336.

kidnapped by the GPU. The trail stopped at an isolated villa next to an airfield occupied by Soviet planes.²⁰¹ Serge wrote and published where he could on Spain. Unfortunately, there is no space in this study of Serge and the Soviet Union for an examination of his writings on that subject, except as they relate to his rupture with Trotsky, which will be taken up below.

5.10 Etienne, Serge and Trotsky: Between Two Left Oppositionists, the NKVD?

Etienne, or Zborowski, was assigned to spy on the Trotskyists in the West.²⁰² He gained Sedov's confidence to the point that he collected and read his mail, and was sometimes editor of the Bulletin of the Left Opposition. He was often the mediator of communications between Trotsky and Sedov, and between Trotsky and Serge. His objective was also to diminish the effectiveness of the Oppositionists and therefore any divisions which he could foster or strengthen would serve the interests of his employer. Etienne performed his tasks so well, that he became Stalin's most precious agent, and Stalin personally read all his reports.²⁰³

The Left Opposition in exile was in constant, real danger of physical liquidation. But this was not their only problem. While their comrades in the USSR were all being killed, the French Trotskyists worked in an milieu of suspicion,

²⁰¹Serge, Memoirs, p. 337.

²⁰²In his testimony to the US Senate, Zborowski reported that among his assignments, he was to inform the NKVD of the activities of the French Trotskyists, to get close to Sedov and lure him to a place where the NKVD would kidnap him (with Zborowski) and send them both back to Russia, to plant documents on the Trotskyists, to get information on their connection with Hitler, and later, as Krivitsky's bodyguard, to witness anything that might happen to him.

²⁰³Zborowski testimony, U.S. Senate Hearings, Feb. 29, 1956, Part 4, pp. 88-89.

demoralization and despair. This led to unhealthy internal discord, and division. The role of the NKVD cannot be overlooked in this regard, though it would be equally incorrect to overstate their influence, since real political differences emerged in an atmosphere that was not always conducive to the free expression of critical thought, especially unorthodox thought.

This was particularly discouraging to Serge, who was wrestling with the contradictions he had begun to consider inherent in 'guided organizations.' He often quoted Rosa Luxemburg's dictum that 'liberty is the liberty of the man who thinks otherwise,' a principle more easily expressed than practiced in the far left, peopled by "the best-disposed men, professing in principle respect for free thought, the critical mind, objective analysis ... [who] in reality do not know how to tolerate thought which is different from their own."²⁰⁴ From Paris to Mexico, Serge continually associated with refugee revolutionaries who embodied intolerance, with all the concomitant consequences of expulsions, inquisitions, etc. More than simply discouraged, Serge sought to understand the problem which surely undermined their effectiveness. He also noted that back in the USSR, the bureaucracy knew how to mobilize these feelings against the Opposition, and yet the Opposition itself exhibited the same qualities.

The problem, Serge wrote, lay in the inability to reconcile intransigence, a necessary quality of being, with respect for the different being. In Russia, socialist politics failed because the social struggles led to socialists treating Marxism as a "faith, then a regime, a double intolerance in consequence."²⁰⁵ Serge's solution to the dilemma was "fighting intransigence, controlled by as objective a rigor as possible

²⁰⁴ Serge, Carnets, 2 October 1944 entry titled "Intransigence, Intolerance, Conflicts," p. 145.

²⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 146.

and by an absolute rule of respect for others, respect for the enemy even."²⁰⁶ These are noble sentiments, but challenged even Serge in practice. In a letter to Hryhory Kostiuk in the final year of Serge's life, he remarked that he remained 'intransigently socialist.'²⁰⁷ Always aware of the difficulty, Serge remarked "Respect for the enemy, the Totalitarians make it difficult, if not impossible."²⁰⁸

Though Serge himself fell victim to the dirty divisive work done by agents, he was conscious that political differences and organizational practices were also responsible for his worsening relations with Trotsky from 1937 on. Serge and Trotsky began to disagree with each other in late 1936, and this grew to a practical rupture by 1939. While Kronstadt and Serge's support of the POUM were the public issues of contention, what angered Trotsky most was Serge's attitude to the Fourth International.

On Dec. 2, 1938, Trotsky wrote a short piece that was published in January 1939 in the Byulleten' Oppozitsii No. 73, entitled "Viktor Serzh i IV Internatsional" which stated that Serge, now a member of the centrist P.O.U.M.²⁰⁹, was an opponent to the FI.²¹⁰ Serge wrote to Trotsky on March 18, 1939:

"I've decided not to react at all to the article in the Bulletin. You are too inaccurate, too unjust and unnecessarily offensive. I don't know who keeps you informed and how, but sadly believe me, there exists a whole nest of intrigues here (which has played its part in the death of Lev Lvovich, and before that, in the death of Reiss, as well as in the failure of the whole Fourth International movement in France."²¹¹

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

²⁰⁷ Serge to Kostiuk, June 22, 1947.

²⁰⁸ Serge, Carnets, p.146.

²⁰⁹ Partido Obrero de Unificacion Marxista (Workers Party of Marxist Unification).

²¹⁰ Byulleten' Oppozitsii, No. 73, Jan. 1939, p. 16.

²¹¹ Serge to Trotsky (in Russian), Paris, March 18, 1939.

In a postscript to this letter, Serge told Trotsky that his rupture with the French Bolshevik-Leninists occurred because he had been told by a 'comrade' that there were serious suspicions about Lola Ya. Ginsburg [See pp. 76-79 above]. Serge thought this should be investigated and confided to Rosmer, Wullens and Elsa Reiss. Elsa told the group, who "refused to look into the substance of the affair, or so I was informed through comrade Etienne. Instead -- it 'brought an action' against me." While it appears that Lilia Ginsberg, known personally as Lola and politically as Paulsen or Yakovlev, was not the NKVD agent, she protected and vouched for the reliability of Etienne/Zborowski the real agent. Zborowski was apparently successful in turning Serge into a political pariah for the group. Trotsky fell right in, and subjected Serge to a horrendous offensive of vitriolic prose. Many political issues were involved, but one of the worst was over Serge's translation of Trotsky's Their Morals and Ours and the prospectus that accompanied its French publication.

5.11 The 'Priere d'Inserer': Who wrote it and to what end?

Serge translated no less than six of Trotsky's books into French, and as already noted, Trotsky was very pleased to have such a talent as Serge to bring his work to French readers. Serge's translation of Trotsky's polemic on means and ends, Their Morals and Ours, (February 1938), brought unwarranted controversy to their relationship. Unfortunately the controversy was not over the content of the book, which Serge thought contained "many fine pages at the end."

The book was subtitled "Marxist Versus Liberal Views on Morality" and provoked a debate between Trotsky and John Dewey, among others. Trotsky was at his polemical best in this book, utilizing colorful and truculent language to paint his opponents. He set out to distinguish revolutionary morality, which is rooted in concrete historical circumstances and has as its goal the liberation of humankind, from the abstract and

timeless morality argued by liberals, social democrats and others Trotsky labeled in vintage descriptive terms. The 'fine pages at the end' of Trotsky's book that Serge referred to contain a discussion of the "Dialectic Interdependence of End and Means." Here Trotsky insisted that base means lead to base ends, that "organically the means are subordinated to the end"²¹² or in other words, the product could only be as pure as the process.

Serge chose not to reply to Trotsky's work, as he explained in a letter to Marcel Martinet on 30 mars 1939:

"Je t'envoie la trad. de "Notre Morale et la Leur" [sic] de L.T. que j'ai faite. C'est energique et tres bien pense d'un point de vue etroit, historiquement deplasse, qui fausse tout, fanatiquement [?]. Je crois que je ne vais pas -- en tout cas en ce moment -- traiter ce sujet et repondre au Vieux, sinon d'un tres strict minimum, pour ne pas faire le mort sur ses attaques.....son intransigence est devenue raideur mortelle et tuante..."

In any case the dispute with Trotsky was not over Serge's translation, or any unspoken disagreements about the ideas Trotsky expressed, but over the promotional prospectus in the French edition, which crudely attacked Trotsky. Without checking with the publisher, Trotsky assumed Serge wrote this invective:

"For Trotsky, there is no such thing as morality per se, no ideal or eternal morality. Morals are relative to each society, to each epoch, relative especially to the interests of social classes. ... True morality must defend the interests of humanity itself, represented by the proletariat. Trotsky thinks that his party, once in power, today in the opposition always represented the real proletariat; and he himself, the real morality. From this he concludes, ..that shooting hostages takes on different meanings depending on whether the order is given by Stalin or by Trotsky or by the bourgeoisie. ... Trotsky, basing himself on Lenin, declares that the end justifies the means (on condition that the means are effective: for example, individual terrorism is generally

²¹²Trotsky, Their Morals and Ours, p. 37.

ineffective.) There is no cynicism in this attitude, declares the author, merely a statement of the facts. And it is to these facts that Trotsky says he owes his acute conscience, which constitutes his moral sense."²¹³

It is inconceivable that Serge could have penned or inspired these thoughts, so out of character with the body of his published work. Trotsky immediately presumed this, however. Instead of verifying the facts with Serge or Les Editions du Sagittaire, Trotsky lifted his pen and wrote a furious addendum to Their Morals and Ours on June 9, 1939, the essay called "The Moralists and Sycophants Against Marxism: Peddlers of Indulgences and their Socialist Allies, or the Cuckoo in a Strange Nest". He wrote,

"...some 'friend,' ... contrived to slip into a strange nest and deposit there his little egg -- oh! it is of course a very tiny egg, an almost virginal egg. Who is the author of this prospectus? Victor Serge, who is at the same time its severest critic, can easily supply the information. I should not be surprised if it turned out that the prospectus was written ... naturally not by Victor Serge but by one of his disciples who imitates both his master's ideas and his style. But, maybe after all, it is the master himself, that is, Victor Serge in his capacity of 'friend' of the author?"²¹⁴

The piece exudes Trotsky's vexation with the 'independents' loosely associated with the Left Opposition. One can detect his obvious frustration at being an ocean away from the discussion, an ocean away from reining in the dissidence. The essay is devoted to a scathing attack against Victor Serge (the moralist) and Boris Souvarine (the sycophant) in language memorable for its viciousness. Trotsky sustained some seven pages of tirade,

²¹³Priere d'inserer, 1939 edition of Their Morals and Ours, Editions du Sagittaire, Appendix C of 1969 (English) Merit edition.

²¹⁴Leon Trotsky, "The Moralists and Sycophants Against Marxism," in Their Morals and Ours, Merit Publishers, New York, 1969, p. 41.

accusing Serge of "Hottentot Morality," of publicly becoming a member of the POUM, of being a "petty bourgeois moralist" who "thinks episodically, in fragments, in clumps," of wanting "to purge human history of civil war." Further, Trotsky berated Serge for dating the degeneration of the revolution from the moment the Cheka began secret trials. Trotsky wrote "Serge plays with the concept of revolution, writes poems about it, but is incapable of understanding it as it is." Apparently one of Serge's worst attributes was that he wrote lyrically, even poetically about revolution; Trotsky returned to this in several articles.²¹⁵ More to the point, Trotsky got to the heart of his animosity to Serge:

"...when we evaluate from the Marxian standpoint the vacillations of a disillusioned petty-bourgeois intellectual, that seems to him an assault upon his individuality. He then enters into an alliance with all the confusionists for a crusade against our despotism and our sectarianism. ... Victor Serge demanded of the Fourth International that it give freedom of action to all confusionists, sectarians and centrists of the P.O.U.M., Vereecken, Marceau Pivert types, to conservative bureaucrats of the Sneevliet type or mere adventurers of the R. Molinier type. On the other hand, Victor Serge has systematically helped centrist organizations drive from their ranks the partisans of the Fourth International."²¹⁶

²¹⁵In a particularly vicious attack on Serge, Trotsky replied to Serge's letter criticizing the creation of the Fourth International: "When the Fourth International becomes 'worthy of the name' in the eyes of Messrs. Literatteurs, dilettantes, and Sceptics, then it will not be difficult to adhere to it. A Victor Serge (this one, or another) will then write a book in which he will prove (with lyricism and with tears!) that the best, the most heroic period of the Fourth International was the time, when bereft of forces, it waged a struggle against innumerable enemies, including petty-bourgeois sceptics." (Leon Trotsky, "'Trotskyism' and the PSOP," Writings of Leon Trotsky (1938-9), New York, Merit Publishers, 1969, p. 134.

²¹⁶Trotsky, Ibid, p. 45.

He ended his diatribe with "the moralism of V. Serge and his compeers is a bridge from revolution to reaction."²¹⁷ The essay seeks to lump Serge with other anti-Bolsheviks and anti-Leninists, those who see Stalin as the heir to Lenin. It is remarkable for its obvious ignorance of Serge's writings, from his Year One, to his Lenin, his civil war writings, his From Lenin to Stalin, his novels, not to mention his articles.

How did Serge react to this vicious onslaught of ad hominem attack? He was heartbroken by what it represented. In the Memoirs Serge lamented:

"Deplorably misinformed by his acolytes, he wrote a long polemical essay against me -- imputing to me an article of which I was not the author and which was totally at variance with my frequently expressed opinions. The Trotskyist journals refused to publish my corrections. In the hearts of the persecuted I encountered the same attitudes as in their persecutors. ... Trotskyism was displaying symptoms of an outlook in harmony with that of the very Stalinism against which it had taken its stand, and by which it was being ground into powder... I was heartbroken by it all, because it is my firm belief that the tenacity and will-power of some men can, despite all odds, break with the traditions that suffocate, and withstand the contagions that bring death. It is painful, it is difficult, but it must be possible. I abstained from any counter-polemic."²¹⁸

Serge was denied access to Trotskyist journals, but nonetheless attempted to internally refute the charges, to clear the air and his name. Publicly Serge refused to break solidarity with Trotsky. Serge wrote to Dwight Macdonald:

"Leon Davidovitch, dans ses recentes attaques contre moi a use de si mauvais procedes que je suis presque content de n'avoir plus le moyen de lui reponde. Il a commence par me critiquer sans me lire et continue en m'imputant un article que je n'ai pas ecrit et a la redaction duquel je n'ai pris aucune part. Tout son papier intitule Moralistes et sycophantes et costera porte ainsi a faux, car il m'impute des arguments et

²¹⁷Trotsky, ibid., p. 50.

²¹⁸Serge, Memoirs, p. 349.

des idees qui m'ont jamais ete les miens. J'ai pourtant beaucoup ecrit en une vingtaine d'annees sur ces sujets et il pourrait le savoir! Il aurait pu aussi se renseigner sur l'auteur du papier qu'il m'impute avec ce bizarre sans-gene! tout cela est fort attristant. J'ai envoye a The New International -- et a Leon Davidovitch lui-meme -- des rectifications dont j'ignore encore le sort. En Europe, les feuilles qui m'ont attaque de cette facon n'ont jamais publie mes reponses. Alors j'ai cesse de repondre. Je suis fixe. "²¹⁹

Serge then penned a reply to Trotsky which he did not publish. It was discovered among Serge's papers by Peter Sedgwick, who translated and published the essay in Peace News, Dec. 27, 1963 (p. 5) under the title "Secrecy and Revolution: a reply to Trotsky." In a letter Serge wrote to Angelica Balabanova on Oct. 23, 1941, Serge explained why he refrained from a public debate with the Old Man, who was engaged in a resolute fight against Stalinism, and whose ideas Serge still deeply respected:

"...in all this painful argument with the Old Man, I kept such esteem and affection for him that, even though he wrote a long polemical attack accusing me of writing an article which was never mine and of advocating ideas which were never mine, I first sent a powerful rebuttal to the printers of La Revolution Proletarienne (Paris) and then took it back from them, preferring to suffer this unjust attack in silence. And I still think I was quite right: truth can work

²¹⁹ Serge to MacDonald, 22 October 1939, MacDonald Papers, Yale University archive. Translation: "In his recent attacks on me, Leon Davidovich has so disabused me that I'm almost glad I no longer have the means to answer him. He began by criticizing me without having read what I wrote, and continues to attribute to me an article that I did not write in a journal with which I have no association. His entire article entitled "Moralists and Sychophants" is thus entirely falsely based, since he ascribes ideas and arguments to me that were never mine. However, I have written a great deal in the last twenty years on these subjects and he should know this! He would also do well to find out who wrote the article he attributes to me without so much as a care. All this is terribly sad. I sent NI and LD himself some corrections, the fate of which are unknown. In Europe the publications that attacked me in this way never published my replies. So I stopped replying. I am adamant."

its way out in different ways than by offensive polemics."²²⁰

Serge also wrote to Trotsky (Aug. 9, 1939) denying any connection to the odious prospectus. Trotsky replied on September 7, 1939 in Byulleten' Oppozitsii, no. 79-80, "Ocherednoe Oproverzhenie Viktora Serzha,"²²¹ that he "willingly accept[ed] his declaration," and then proceeded to attack Serge for having "a confused mood of uncertainty, disillusionment, dissatisfaction, and repulsion from Marxism and proletarian revolution." As to the authorship of the prospectus, Trotsky wrote "if not he personally, then one of his disciples or cothinkers. The supposition that the prospectus was written by Victor Serge occurred to various comrades, independently of one another. And not by chance: the blurb constitutes a simple resume of Victor Serge's latest sermonizings."²²²

Which comrades? Etienne? Pierre Frank? Whether or not Etienne directly raised the issue with Trotsky, or incited others to do so, he could be justly proud of accomplishing his objective, of dividing the two surviving Left Oppositionists and occupying them with incessant internal intrigue. Yet Trotsky seemed to dismiss the possibility of the hand of the NKVD. In a letter to Serge published in the Writings as "Victor Serge's Crisis" Trotsky wrote:

²²⁰Victor Serge to Angelica Balabanova, Oct. 23, 1941, Serge Archive, Mexico.

²²¹Trotsky, BO, No. 79-80, August-September, 1939, p. 31. The English translation, "Another Refutation by Victor Serge," is published as Appendix B in the Merit edition of Their Morals and Ours.

²²²L.D. Trotsky, Byulleten' Oppozitsii, no. 79-80, p. 31, "esli ne on lichno, to kto-libo iz ego uchenikov ili edinomuishlennikov. Predpolozhenie o tom, chto prospekt napisan Viktorom Serzhem, vzniklo u raznuikh tovarishchei, nezavisimo drug ot druga. I ne mudreno: prospekt predstavlyaet prostoe rezyume noveishikh propovedei Viktora Serzha!

"you are passing through a protracted ideological crisis and ... you are turning your dissatisfaction with yourself into dissatisfaction with others. You write about intrigues, false information, etc. I don't know about any of that. ...I do not lose the hope of seeing you return to the road of the Fourth International. But at present you are an adversary, and a hostile one at that, who demands nonetheless to be treated as a political friend."²²³

Serge was categorical that he "never published a single line concerning that work [Their Morals and Ours] of his, in any publication or in any shape or form."²²⁴ Serge continued, "I am not the author of this prospectus: I have had no part, direct or indirect, in composing it: I have no idea who its author is: and I do not care either. Is that clear enough?"²²⁵ The real author of the prospectus is still unknown. Vlady believes Zborowski wrote it,²²⁶ and I put that question to him several times, without ever being graced with a reply.²²⁷ Pierre Broue believes an editor wrote it²²⁸, which could have been done under Zborowski's guidance.

Despite Serge's denial, the issue of his authorship refused to die. Pierre Frank rehashed the rumor that Serge had written the prospectus in the introduction to the second French edition of Their Morals and Ours in 1966, three years after Peter Sedgwick published Serge's refutation in Peace News, 19 years after Serge's death. In his introduction, Frank not only repeated that Serge wrote the prospectus, he grouped Serge with

²²³Trotsky to Serge, May 6, 1939. Published in Writings of Leon Trotsky: Supplement 1934-1940, p. 836.

²²⁴Victor Serge, "Secrecy and Revolution -- a reply to Trotsky," Peace News, London, Dec. 27, 1963, p. 5.

²²⁵Serge, ibid.

²²⁶Private conversation, Mexico City, January 1986.

²²⁷See pp.80 and fn 190 above.

²²⁸Private conversation, Los Angeles, October 1989.

Max Eastman and Sidney Hook, two former Marxists turned cold warriors. How was it possible to ignore both Serge's refutation and Trotsky's acknowledgement of Serge's denial? It appears that Pierre Frank held Serge in particular contempt and had an undue influence over official Trotskyist thought about Serge.²²⁹ Finally, under Pierre Broue's direction (but proclaimed dissatisfaction with the result²³⁰) Michel Dreyfus published, in 1977, the Serge-Trotsky correspondence La Lutte contre le Stalinisme (Maspero) and again repeated the assertion that Serge was the author of the prospectus, without so much as acknowledging that Serge had refuted that charge, and Trotsky accepted his refutation.

The rupture over the prospectus was really the culmination of disagreements over several issues, specifically Serge's support of the POUM, and his attitude to the Fourth International. Trotsky was offended by this 'defection' and the intransigent and excessive tone of his polemic reflected his anger.

Defection notwithstanding, Serge still functioned in the orbit of Trotskyism and held the Old Man in great esteem; and he was considered a 'Trotskyist' by the larger political public. He later wrote in his diary:

"I went on translating the Old Man's books, La Revolution trahie, Les Crimes de Staline, Leur Morale et la Notre and to defend him. I remained in the eyes of the general public the best-known "Trotskyist" writer -- while the "b-l" disparaged me as far as they could. I had become for them a "petit-bourgeois intellectual" of whom they had to "make use of the

²²⁹In 1974 I was told by leading members of the British section of the Fourth International that Serge was a 'centrist' and (therefore) wasn't worth reading. Ernest Mandel, the recognized international leader of the Fourth International today, told me in Mexico in August 1990 that he 'would drop a bomb' at the Serge Centenary Colloquium by publicly clearing Serge's name.

²³⁰Interviews with Pierre Broue, Mexico 1987, Los Angeles 1989.

influence" and the "questionable sympathy." -- The sense of possession of the truth, the intolerance and the aggressiveness devoid of critical sense of Leur Morale made me furious although there are fine, worthwhile pages at the end of this essay. I said so to some Trotskyists who wrote and told the Old Man and that at once brought fresh attacks upon me. The saddest thing was that they were always insulting and always based on inaccurate data. It would have been so simple to state: We're at considerable variance on such and such a point, --but the Old Man and his followers had become completely incapable of holding such a straightforward dialogue. The frightening atmosphere of persecution in which they lived -- like me -- made them inclined to a persecution complex and to the practice of persecution."²³¹

5.12 The Fourth International, Kronstadt Debate, the POUM

Trotsky's mission, once the Great Purge was underway in the Soviet Union and the Stalinists were killing the left in Spain, was to create a world party of revolution, a revolutionary pole of attraction for workers the world over who were repulsed by Stalinism and disgusted by the parliamentary reformism of the social democrats. He devoted most of his energy to the Fourth International, and naturally wanted all revolutionary Marxists to share his vision of this world revolutionary organization. Victor Serge, as an exiled Russian Left Oppositionist with intellectual standing in Europe would be an asset to the Fourth International.

Trotsky sent Serge a draft which was adopted by the July 1936 Conference for the Fourth International, entitled "The New Revolutionary Upsurge and the tasks of the Fourth International."²³² Serge dispatched his comments to Trotsky on July 19, 1936, titled "A New Revolutionary Upturn?" Firstly

²³¹Serge, "My rupture with Trotsky" July 1936, Carnets, pp. 44-47.

²³²Published in LDT, Writings 1935-1936, New York, 1970, pp. 32-35.

Serge disagreed on LDT's assessment of the readiness of the workers in Europe for revolutionary struggle. Trotsky viewed the French Popular Front and the Spanish Civil War as signs that the revolutionary upsurge was beginning. Serge countered Trotsky's thesis, saying that workers were just "emerging, awakening out of a long period of depression; it is the beginning of a process," that was a product of ten years of exhaustion brought on by the war and the post-war defeats. This is no minor difference: a revolutionary conjuncture demands a revolutionary practice quite distinct from the tasks of a period of recovery.

With regard to the Second International, Serge wrote it was wrong to consider it homogeneous, and "our criticism and pressure ... [can] help them in a more positive direction." The different perception of the nature of the conjuncture also led to different attitudes toward the Popular Front, which Serge thought of as an arena of struggle for revolutionary working class demands. Serge wrote that their task was to "exert enough pressure on the Popular Front.. [it could] be a useful transitional from which will allow the workers to enter later phases of the struggle with greater possibilities." Serge's slogan was "transform the Popular Front from an instrument of class-collaboration into an instrument of class-struggle" which obviously implied a split with bourgeois and bourgeois-dominated elements and the re-grouping of the working class forces around a revolutionary programme which can assure them of the support of the middle classes."²³³

A.J. Muste, an American minister whose American Workers Party fused with the Communist League to form the American section of the Fourth International (the Socialist Workers

²³³Victor Serge: Observations on the Theses of the July Conference of the Fourth International, Sections 1,5,and 9." July 19, 1936, Serge archives.

Party),²³⁴ visited Serge in Brussels in late July 1936, on behalf of Trotsky and the Bureau for the Fourth International, in order "to convey Leon Davidovich's proposal that I join this Bureau as a co-opted member. I accepted."²³⁵

After discussing with Muste, Serge wrote a letter to Trotsky (July 27, 1936) in which he put forward his ideas on how the organization could reach and recruit as many people as possible. Serge envisioned a broad revolutionary party with a truly professional and quality press that encouraged open debate in a fraternal style. "Our ideological intransigence must be expressed and developed in an atmosphere of free collaboration, without anxiety about secondary differences."²³⁶ Serge emphasized that the organization while being ideologically firm, remain open and non-sectarian, trying to unify non-Stalinist forces. He also wrote that the question of the "nature of the Soviet State and of the defence of the USSR -- matters on which enormous confusion reigns among the rank and file," be left open, since it was an important educational question but not one of principle.

Trotsky replied to Serge on July 30, 1936, stating that he couldn't agree, and moreover, criticized Serge for his 'artistic and psychological' approach which was insufficiently political.²³⁷ Trotsky was more concrete than Serge and showed how various people in practice would not be suitable to the organization since they were "petty bourgeois through and through; their little houses, little gardens and cars are a thousand times dearer to them than the fate of the proletariat."

²³⁴For an insiders account of this process, see James P. Cannon, The History of American Trotskyism, Pathfinder Press, New York, 1972.

²³⁵Serge, "My Break With Trotsky," Carnets, p. 44.

²³⁶VS to LDT, Brussels, July 27, 1936.

²³⁷LDT to VS, July 30, 1936.

Serge simply did not share Trotsky's view of these anti-Stalinist activists.

By mid 1937, Serge and Trotsky began to have serious disagreements. In 1938 Serge entered into a polemic over Kronstadt which was splashed across the pages of The New International, Lutte Ouvriere, La Revolution proletarienne, Byulleten Oppozitsii and elsewhere. The Kronstadt debate came in the wake of the Spanish Civil War, and had everything to do with the role of the anarchists and POUM. Serge wrote in his diary:

"About this time, I had a correspondence with Trotsky on the subject of the Spanish anarchists whom Leon Sedov dismissed as "destined to stab the Revolution in the heart." I thought they would play a key role in the Civil War and advised Trotsky and the Fourth International to publish a declaration of sympathy with them, in which the revolutionary Marxists would pledge themselves to struggle for liberty. L.D. said I was right and promised that something on these lines would be done, but it never was.

In January 37, I attended an international conference of the Fourth in Amsterdam. It was held at Sneevliet's place: he lived at Overtoom and had a comfortable meeting-room in the attic. Already the Trotskyists were directing all their fire at the POUM. I took the floor to justify the POUM's participation in the Catalan Generalitat, on the grounds of the need to control and influence the Government from within and to facilitate the arming of the masses. With Vereecken and Sneevliet, I proposed a resolution of solidarity with the POUM, which ended with an appeal to the Spanish militants to preserve the unity of their party. Pierre Naville, Gerard Rosenthal and Rudolf Klement protested against these formulations: it became obvious that even while addressing diplomatic compliments to the POUM, they were organizing a split in its ranks. Two English delegates to Amsterdam told me that the movement of the Fourth International numbered less than a hundred members in England -- and split into two rival organizations, as in France.

I came back from Amsterdam sore at heart: the impression of a sectarian movement, controlled by manoeuvres from on high, afflicted by all the mental depravities which we had struggled against in Russia: authoritarianism, factionalism, intrigues, schemes, narrow-mindedness, intolerance. Sneevliet and his party had enough, finding the atmosphere unbreathable;

they were honest, sober Dutch proletarians, used to fraternal norms of conduct. Vereecken, who idolized the Old Man, said to me: "I give you less than six months to fall out with him. He doesn't tolerate any opposition."²³⁸

Serge took part in the Fourth International, including its founding conference, and worked with its members until he developed disagreements with them over their attitude to the POUM, the stifling internal atmosphere and his conviction that within the Fourth International Serge

"could not detect the hope of the Left Opposition in Russia for a renewal of the ideology, morals and institutions of Socialism. In the countries I knew at first hand, Belgium, Holland, France and Spain, the tiny parties of the 'Fourth International,' ravaged by frequent splits and, in Paris, by deplorable feuding, amounted only to a feeble and sectarian movement out of which, I judged, no fresh thinking could emerge. The life of these groups was maintained by nothing but the prestige of the Old Man and his great, unceasing efforts; and both his prestige and the quality of his efforts deteriorated in the process. The very idea of starting an International at the moment when all international socialist organizations were dying, when reaction was in full flood, and without support of any kind, seemed quite senseless to me."²³⁹

In the FI Serge found a crude caricature of Trotsky's intransigence, here translated into simple inflexibility. Their shallow dogmatic and sectarian thinking was all very discouraging to Serge.

Further, Serge came to believe that the timing was all wrong: the creation of a Party of world revolution during a period of defeat (fascism, war, Soviet totalitarianism) was futile, if not pretentious. Thus the correspondence between Serge and Trotsky reveals a conflict of objectives: Trotsky wanted Serge to play a leading role in the Fourth International, and Serge was dubious of the project from the start.

²³⁸VS, "My Break With Trotsky," Carnets, pp. 44-47.

²³⁹Serge, Memoirs, p. 348.

Serge was certain that a non-Stalinist federation would have been better suited the new world situation. Serge was less specific than Trotsky on the actual character of the non-Stalinist organizations he hoped would come together in this federation, nor did Serge address the issue of their revolutionary capabilities, or their commitment to socialist revolution. In a sense there is a parallelity to the situation in 1921, when Serge reluctantly supported the Party against the Kronstadt rebels. At the time, Serge reasoned that every political worker who was actively engaged in the Socialist project was already inside the Party, and indeed it was the Lenin levy that destroyed this instrument of communist conviction by diluting it, thereby easing the victory of the bureaucracy. Similarly, the various shades of revolutionary consciousness found in Europe in 1936-39 did not indicate homogeneous professional revolutionaries united in their task of seizing power. Trotsky was probably correct that this mix of syndicalists, anarchists and Mensheviks could not be depended on and probably were on a social democratic trajectory. Serge on the other hand, was interested in uniting the left around solidarity with the POUM, campaigns on behalf of the imprisoned revolution in Russia, and where possible, injecting revolutionary politics in existing struggles. He was also certain that the Trotskyists would assume a leadership position within the larger non-Stalinist international federation.

While Trotsky's misgivings about the non-Stalinist-but-non-Trotskyist left were important, Serge thought the Trotskyist left "spent most of their strength and ...their time in intriguing against each other and in running each other down in whole books. I reproached them bitterly for squandering their resources like this when no publicity was being given to our imprisoned comrades in Russia. I refused to listen to ... their contemptible bickerings, saying to Rous: "if I was a member of one of your two groups, this atmosphere

would make me resign at once. You are sick sectarians."²⁴⁰

Serge cut himself off from the Fourth International in 1937, tried to avoid controversy, and "made every effort to do the militants and LD all the good turns I could."²⁴¹ Serge did not refrain, in 1938, from his polemic with Trotsky over Kronstadt and other vital issues. After all, there was an entire generation of political militants who would benefit from an airing of the issues surrounding the suppression of the Kronstadt rebels. He was subjected to a torrent of abuse from LDT's pen in this same period. Yet even as Trotsky attacked Serge publicly, he privately wrote him:

"I am still ready to do everything to create conditions for collaboration ... but only on one condition: if you yourself decide that you belong to the camp of the Fourth International and not to the camp of its adversaries."²⁴²

In a letter to Trotsky in Russian, datelined Paris, March 18, 1939, Serge defended his activities and once again laid bare his differences with the Old Man on the question of the International:

"I can assure you personally that I took no part in any groupings 'opposed to the Fourth.' Of course I feel closer to comrades-heretics, because I believe they are right: it's time to follow a new road, not to stick to the well-trodden paths of the late Comintern. Nevertheless, not only did I not participate in any 'factional activities', but tried whenever I could to soften the inevitable split. You will hardly find another person in existing groups as alien to any kind of 'intrigue' as myself. But enough about that. the same thing all over again: one cannot say honestly, calmly and with dignity, 'Yes, we have serious disagreements' -- one must always discredit or even slightly slander the other side.

Our disagreements are very great indeed....I am convinced that one cannot build an international while

²⁴⁰Serge, "Ma Rupture avec Trotski," Carnets, p. 48.

²⁴¹Ibid.

²⁴²LDT to VS [in Russian], April 15, 1938.

there are no parties... One should not play with the words 'party' and 'International.' But there are no parties here. It is a dead end. Only small groups manage to hold out somehow in this deadlock, but they have no dynamism, no influence, nor even a common language with the working-class movement. One cannot build an international organization on intolerance and the Bolshevik-Leninist doctrine, for in the whole world there are no more than two hundred people (except the surviving inmates of Stalin, perhaps) who are in a position to understand what Bolshevism-Leninism is. ... For the time being, no one in the Fourth International groups thinks except through your head.

What should be done? The solution, I believe, lies in an alliance with all the left-wing currents of the workers' movement (its platform: the class struggle and internationalism; in free, comradely discussion of every issue, without abuse and mutual recriminations; in the creation of an International Bureau of committees and similar bodies -- such a Bureau to be composed of the representatives of local movements and to work towards concrete goals; one must abandon the idea of Bolshevik-Leninist hegemony in the left-wing workers' movement and create an international alliance, which would reflect the real ideological tendencies of the most advanced sections of the working class (I am convinced that in such an alliance the Bolshevik-Leninists would have a greater influence than in their own high and mighty International)."²⁴³

Serge's attitude to the POUM, the French Popular Front, and the Fourth International were based on his concern that the revolutionary Marxists not be cut off from the political arena that held the attention of the working class. His position was not one of purist intransigence, as he saw the Fiers -- in principled opposition to centrist and 'class collaborationists.' Serge was neither a centrist (between reform and revolution) nor a class collaborationist but he strongly felt that the Bolshevik-Leninists could have a positive influence on these groupings which in both cases had boosted the confidence and increased the combativity of the working class. Trotsky's position of no class collaboration led him to counterpose the

²⁴³VS to LDT, March 18, 1939, 5 pps.

United Front to the Popular Front, which was correct in principle, but simply not on the agenda in either Spain or France, in Serge's view, and therefore cut the Trotskyists from the main arena of struggle. Though Serge was perhaps overly enthusiastic about what could be achieved with the Popular Front²⁴⁴ and the POUM, he also saw that the Trotskyists would be seen as sectarian, which would lead to their isolation in a struggle too important not to have some influence over. Furthermore, the behavior of the Fourth International over the Spanish events was disturbing: Serge wrote Sedov that they

"schitayut sebya prizvannuimi svuisoka i s krikami rukovodit' revolutsiee v drugoi strane i vidyat edinstvennii svoj put' v sozdanii fraktsii a la Komintern i perspektive raskola. Etot put' nikuda ochevidno ne vedyet esli ne k diskreditatsii Ivgo."²⁴⁵

Serge's disdain for the Fourth International's tactics in Spain and his insistence on solidarity with the POUM was seen as a capitulation to reformism by the Trotskyists and Serge was forever more labeled a Centrist.

The stamp 'Moralist' came from Serge's renewal of the debate on Kronstadt. This debate took place in late 1937 and throughout

²⁴⁴But Serge's enthusiasm was less than Trotsky's in 1936 when Trotsky wrote Serge in envy that Serge would be off to Paris where the "birth-pangs of the French Revolution" had begun with a massive strike. LDT to VS [in Russian], June 9, 1936. Serge replied with a cautionary note, "The wonderful strikes in France and here show clearly that the working class is recovering after its phase of depression and extreme fatigue, and is entering a new period of struggle. In such a situation one may hope for anything, so long as one does not expect an immediate all-round upsurge." VS to LDT [in Russian] -Brussels, June 16, 1936.

²⁴⁵VS to LLS, 21 January 1937. Translation: [They] consider themselves called from above... to lead the revolution in another country, and they see their one path in the creation of factions a la Komintern and in a schizmatic perspective. This path will obviously lead nowhere, if not to the discredit of the Fourth."

1938 in journals in Europe and America.²⁴⁶ In 'dredging up' this ignominious chapter in Bolshevik history, Serge had not changed his position of siding with the party, but wanted the Party to understand how they came to be in the position of executing workers. The libertarians and anarchists in Europe were quick to point to the similarities between the Moscow Trials and the suppression of the Kronstadt rebellion. While the anarchists and POUMistas were being betrayed by the Communists in Spain, the Kronstadt debate served as a foil for the larger question of whether Stalinism was the natural outgrowth of Leninism, or a deviation from it.

Serge did not share this view, nor was it his purpose in intervening in the debate about Kronstadt. Trotsky saw Serge's intervention as a way of "manufactur[ing] a sort of synthesis of anarchism, POUMism and Marxism",²⁴⁷ which was not far from the truth. Nonetheless Serge was more than that, and at the same time that he argued with Trotsky over the importance of a reappraisal of what went wrong at Kronstadt and how it could have been avoided, he defended the Party against Anton Ciliga in the same pages of the New International. To Trotsky Serge maintained it was a lie that the Kronstadters wanted

²⁴⁶The following articles comprised the main part of the debate: LDT: "On Makhno and Kronstadt (July 6, 1937), VS: "Fiction and Fact, Kronstadt," (La Revolution Proletarienne, Sept. 10, 1937), VS, "Kronstadt 1921, Against Sectarianism, Bolshevism and Anarchism," (La Rev Prol, no. 257, Oct. 25, 1937), LDT: "Hue and Cry Over Kronstadt" Jan. 15, 1938 (The New International, April 1938), VS, "Once More: Kronstadt" April 28, 1938, (The New International, July 1938), LDT: "Again on the Kronstadt Repression" July 6, 1938, VS, "A Letter and Some Notes," October 31, 1938, VS "More on the Suppression of Kronstadt", July 6, 1938 (The New International, August 1938).

²⁴⁷LDT, "Hue and Cry Over Kronstadt," Jan. 15, 1938, published in the April 1938 issue of The New International.

privileges²⁴⁸: they wanted to end War Communism, restore soviet democracy and restore trade, which is what the NEP set out to do. Serge insisted it was not only healthy to look back at what happened, and how it could have been avoided, but that this was essential to draw the lessons. Trotsky agreed that it was "necessary to learn and think" but that advice was very easy to give after the event.²⁴⁹ For his part, Trotsky revealed that he did not personally "participate in the suppression of the rebellion nor in the repressions following the suppression." However, as a member of the government Trotsky "considered the quelling of the rebellion necessary and therefore [I] bear responsibility for the suppression."²⁵⁰

Trotsky aimed his fire at the 'moralists,' like Souvarine and Ciliga, who were interested in the question of LDT's personal responsibility. Serge also entered the fray, in order to defend the ideals of October from those, like Ciliga, who "judged [the revolution] in the light of Stalinism alone" and who directed personal attacks "against Trotsky out of bad faith, ignorance and sectarian spirit."²⁵¹ Serge took on Anton Ciliga's ahistorical critique, stating,

²⁴⁸Trotsky had said that "The Kronstadters had demanded privileges" and Serge countered that he had been in Petrograd with Zinoviev at the time and followed events at close hand. The country was starving and the Kronstadters demanded 'freely elected soviets' and the abolition of the militias' barricades (zagraditelnye otriady) which stopped the population from looking for food on their own in the countryside. Moreover, Serge insisted, both the uprisings and the repression could have been avoided had the Central Committee listened to the Kronstadters grievances. Victor Serge, "Les Ecrits et Les Faits; Kronstadt," La Revolution proletarienne, (Paris) No. 254, Sept. 10, 1937.

²⁴⁹LDT, "Hue and Cry Over Kronstadt," Jan. 15, 1938, The New International, April 1938.

²⁵⁰LDT, Ibid.

²⁵¹VS, "A Letter and Some Notes," The New International, February 1939, p. 53.

"What greater injustice can be imagined towards the Russian revolution than to judge it in the light of Stalinism alone? ... It is often said that 'the germ of all Stalinism was in Bolshevism at its beginning.' Well, I have no objection. Only, Bolshevism also contained many other germs, a mass of other germs and those who lived through the enthusiasm of the first years of the first victorious socialist revolution ought not to forget it. To judge the living man by the death germs which the autopsy reveals in a corpse -- and which he may have carried in him since his birth -- is that very sensible?

.. A little direct contact with the people was enough to get an idea of the drama which, in the revolution, separated the communist party (and with it the dust of the other revolutionary groups) from the masses. At no time did the revolutionary workers form more than a trifling percentage of the masses themselves. In 1920-21, all that was energetic, militant, ever-so-little socialistic in the labor population and among the advanced elements of the countryside had already been drained by the communist party, which did not, for four years of civil war, stop its constant mobilization of the willing -- down to the most vacillating. Eloquence of chronology: it is the non-party workers of this epoch, joining the party to the number of 2,000,000 in 1924, upon the death of Lenin, who assure the victory of its bureaucracy. I assure you, Ciliga, that these people never thought of the Third International. Many of the insurgents of Kronstadt did think of it; but they constituted an undeniable elite and, duped by their own passion, they opened in spite of themselves the doors to a frightful counter-revolution. The firmness of the Bolshevik party, on the other hand, sick as it was, delayed Thermidor by five to ten years."²⁵²

Clearly Serge and Trotsky had much in common in these thoughts. It was not Serge who dredged up the debate in light of the Spanish Civil War and a need to link the Stalinist weeds with the Leninist germs, but Trotsky himself, in the Dewey Commission on the Moscow Trials, when he was defending his record against the calumny of the whole weight of the Soviet state. Serge took the opportunity to raise some issues he thought worthy of

²⁵²Victor Serge, "Reply to Ciliga," The New International, February 1939.

reflection, which had an educational value for the left in the West.

Trotsky's tone, in all of his replies, was one of exasperation. He seemed most angry by the debates Serge raised. When Serge published in Partisan Review an article entitled "Marxism in Our Time"²⁵³ Trotsky replied without any evidence of having read Serge's piece. Trotsky's disagreements with Serge here turn into simple ad hominem attack:

"the ranks of the disillusioned include not only Stalinists but also the temporary fellow travelers of Bolshevism. Victor Serge -- to cite an instance -- has recently announced that Bolshevism is passing through a crisis which presages in turn the 'crisis of Marxism.' In his theoretical innocence, Serge imagines himself the first to have made this discovery. Yet, in every epoch of reaction, scores and hundreds of unstable revolutionists have risen to announce the 'crisis of Marxism' -- the final, the crucial, the mortal crisis.

That the old Bolshevik Party has spent itself, has degenerated and perished -- that much is beyond controversy. ... this does not at all invalidate Marxism, which is the algebra of revolution. That Victor Serge himself is passing through a 'crisis', i.e. has become hopelessly confused like thousands of other intellectuals -- is clear enough. But Victor Serge in crisis is not the crisis of Marxism."²⁵⁴

In a fragment found among Trotsky's papers in Mexico, written sometime in 1939, he reached, perhaps, the peak of his animosity:

"Victor Serge claims that his enunciations, statements, and corrections, always revolving around his own personality, must without exception be printed by the workers' publications. Why? On what basis? What does Victor Serge represent today in the workers' movement? An ulcer of his own doubts, of his own confusion and nothing more. ...What do people of the Victor Serge type represent? Our conclusion is

²⁵³VS, "Marxism in Our Time," Partisan Review, Vol. V, No.3, August-Sept. 1939, pp. 26-32.

²⁵⁴LDT, "Intellectual Ex-Radicals and World Reaction," Feb. 17, 1939, published in Writings (1938-1939), Pathfinder Press, pp. 194-196.

simple: these verbose, coquettish moralists, capable of bringing only trouble and decay, must be kept out of the revolutionary organization, even by cannonfire if necessary."²⁵⁵

Clearly with this fragment Trotsky overstepped the bounds from viciousness to deadliness. It was as if all his frustrations at being physically prevented from playing a leading role in the struggle in the USSR and Europe were vented in his literary tantrums against comrades like Serge. His own son, Lev Lvovich Sedov, a frequent subject of Trotsky's anger, recognized the deleterious effects of this kind of outburst:

"I think that all Dad's deficiencies have not diminished as he grew older, but under the influence of his isolation, very difficult, unprecedentedly difficult, gotten worse. His lack of tolerance, hot temper, inconsistency, even rudeness, his desire to humiliate, offend and even destroy have increased. It is not 'personal,' it is a method and hardly good in organization of work."²⁵⁶

The rupture between Serge and Trotsky was never really completed, and had the character of a quarrel with room for conciliation. Even as Trotsky spewed out the worst venom, some of which is quoted above, he always left open the door for cooperation, provided of course, that Serge work within the FI. For Serge's part, the pain of Trotsky's invective was great, but did not deflect from Serge's essential appreciation of Trotsky's

²⁵⁵LDT, Writings, Supplement (1934-1940), p. 872.

²⁵⁶Lev Lyovich Sedov to his mother, Natalia Sedova, 16 April 1936. Having vented his own frustration at his father's inconsistent meddling with the French Trotskyists, Sedov never sent this letter, and remained publicly his father's most ardent supporter. The letter was found in the Boris Nicolaevsky Collection at Stanford's Hoover Institution, series 231. It was also cited by Dale Reed and Michael Jakobson in "Trotsky Papers at the Hoover Institution: One Chapter of an Archival Mystery Story," The American Historical Review, Volume 92, Number 2, April 1987, p. 366.

"greatness" whose "traits were those of several generations, developed to a very high degree of individual perfection."²⁵⁷

In an essay Serge wrote to the memory of LDT, he described Trotsky as

"a doer, but one who brought to everything he did a lyrical touch.

...His absolute conviction that he knew the truth made him impervious to argument toward the end and detracted from his scientific spirit. He was authoritarian, because in our time of barbaric struggles thought turned into action must of necessity become authoritarian. When power was within his reach in 1924 and 1925, he refused to seize it because he felt that a socialist regime could not be run by decree.

...The end of his life was played out in loneliness. He often paced up and down in his study in Coyoacan talking to himself. ... he would engage in discussions with Kamenev who had been shot long before; he was often heard addressing him by name. Although he was still at the height of his intellectual powers, what he wrote towards the end did not approach his earlier work in quality. People often forget that intelligence does not exist in a vacuum. What would Beethoven have been had he been exiled among the deaf? A man's intelligence needs to breathe. The 'Old Man's intellectual greatness was a product of his generation's. He needed direct contact with men of the same spiritual stamp as himself, men who could understand his unspoken thoughts and could argue on his level. He needed a Bukharin, a Pyatakov, a Preobrazhensky, a Rakovsky and an Ivan Smirnov; he needed Lenin to be fully himself. Even among us, who were younger but included such fine men as Eltsin, Solntsev, Yakovin, Dingaelsstadt and Pankratov...he could find no equal; they lacked the advantage of his ten unique years of experience and thought."²⁵⁸

All the more tragic, then, that Serge and Trotsky were not able to work together in those dark years, that Serge's generous, comradely attitude to Trotsky was not reciprocated.

²⁵⁷VS, "The Old Man," August 1, 1942, written in Mexico, "to the memory of Leon Davidovich Trotsky" and published in Victor Serge and Natalia Sedova Trotsky, The Life and Death of Leon Trotsky, Basic Books, 1975, p. 4.

²⁵⁸Serge and Sedova, Ibid. pp. 2-5.

Worse, for Serge, was the destructive behavior of the Trotskyists. It is clear that Serge did not think Trotsky a Trotskyist in this sense. Trotsky's inflexibility could be understood, wrote Serge, because he was "the last survivor of a generation of giants." For the present generation and the future, however, Serge was convinced that

"Socialism too had to renew itself in the world of today, and that this must take place through the jettisoning of the authoritarian, intolerant tradition of turn-of-the-century Russian Marxism. I recalled, for use against Trotsky himself, a sentence of astounding vision which he had written in 1914 I think: 'Bolshevism may very well be an excellent instrument for the conquest of power, but after that it will reveal its counter-revolutionary aspects.'

... Our Oppositional movement in Russia had not been Trotskyist, since we had no intention of attaching it to a personality, rebels as we ourselves were against the cult of the Leader. We regarded the Old Man only as one of our greatest comrades, an elder member of the family over whose ideas we argued freely....

I came to the conclusion that our Opposition had simultaneously contained two opposing lines of significance. For the great majority .. it meant resistance to totalitarianism in the name of the democratic ideals expressed at the beginning of the Revolution; for a number of our Old Bolshevik leaders it meant, on the contrary, the defence of doctrinal orthodoxy which, while not excluding a certain tendency towards democracy, was authoritarian through and through. These two mingled strains had, between 1923 and 1928 surrounded Trotsky's vigorous personality with a tremendous aura. If, in his exile from the USSR, he had made himself the ideologist of a renewed Socialism, critical in outlook and fearing diversity less than dogmatism, perhaps he would have attained a new greatness. But he was the prisoner of his own orthodoxy, the more so since his lapses into unorthodoxy were being denounced as treason. He saw his role as that of one carrying into the world at large a movement which was not only Russian—but extinct in Russia itself, killed twice over, both by the bullets of its executioners and by changes in human mentality."²⁵⁹

²⁵⁹ Serge, Memoirs, pp. 348-350. These thoughts were echoed in a letter Serge wrote to Trotsky on May 27, 1936. In discussing the strands of thought in the Left Opposition, Serge quoted Eltsin who admitted that the 'GPU created any unity we have.'

Chapter Five: Section II

FROM PARIS TO MARSEILLES, MARSEILLES TO MEXICO: THE LONG, LAST JOURNEY FROM NIGHTMARE TO REFUGE

II. 5.13 "When Paris Ends, the World Ends..."

This chapter in Serge's life is very well documented. He wrote about it in his Memoirs, carried on a voluminous correspondence with Dwight and Nancy Macdonald in New York in search of material assistance and a visa for himself, his family, and other refugees in dire circumstances, and the experience is memorialized in the books of MaryJayne Gold, Varian Fry and Daniel Benedite, all of whom were with Serge in Marseilles in Villa Air-Bel. Nancy Macdonald also wrote of her experience with her 'first refugee', Victor Serge, in her account of the committee to rescue Spanish exiles.

Serge fled Paris in June of 1940 just as the Nazis entered the city gates. The war was on, but Serge commented that the French bourgeoisie was less than enthusiastic about fighting the fascists, who they preferred to the Popular Front of Leon Blum.¹ Thus, the 'phony war' which was barely fought, ending in France's surrender and division between occupied France, and the collaborationist, Vichy regime in the unoccupied South.² As the German Army advanced, the roads to the South filled with the refugees not only from the occupied sector, but also from [defeated] Republican Spain, and Nazi Germany.

Europe's difficult situation only magnified Serge's own already precarious political and personal predicament. Serge's

¹Memoirs, p. 352.

²The first year of WWII was called the 'phony war' because it was uneventful and led to France's rapid capitulation. MaryJayne Gold described it as "rather a bore ... [because] nothing much happened on the military fronts and there was nothing much to do in the rear." MaryJayne Gold, Crossroads Marseilles 1940, p. viii. Jean Malaquais wrote Serge that the troops at the front were utterly passive, talking only of women and booze. (Memoirs, p. 354)

second edition of L'An I was postponed and the publicity for his just published Portrait de Stalin was canceled. He now lived with Laurette Sejourne,³ Vlady and Jeanine. He watched the bombs, knew it was time to leave, and yet clung to Paris, vainly hoping the situation would turn, in a sort of denial of the truth. Indeed, Serge commented: "When Paris ends the world ends; useless to see the truth, how could one bear to acknowledge it?"⁴ He certainly wasn't alone in this, and many waited longer before taking to the South. In Serge's case one reason was his material situation; he simply never had the money to plot his future. That he waited until the last possible moment to escape also conforms to his character and his past -- he had to be there, to witness the cataclysms, to participate. In the Memoirs Serge wrote that he was writing some pages of a novel, not out of a love for literature, but because "this age must be witnessed."⁵

II. 5.14 The Sense of History

Serge's escape during the fall of France is charted in his novel The Long Dusk. There are glimpses of his thinking in several passages, sardonic reflections on the role of intelligence in a Europe taken over by barbaric totalitarianisms, the one fascist, the other Stalinist. His characters Tullio Gaetani and Dr. Ardatov (an older and more weary incarnation of Serge) reflect on their situation, and

³Liuba Russakova's (Serge's second wife) mental illness finally got the best of her and Serge had to leave her behind in a sanatorium in the South of France, where she remained until her death in 1985. He met Laurette, a French actress who had worked in Italy, in Paris. Laurette was described by MaryJayne Gold as a "very young-looking thirty-year-old" who resembled a "Luini Madonna." Gold, p. 245. Laurette Sejourne married Don A. Orfila after Serge's death and resides with him today in Mexico City. She has published several anthropological works.

⁴Memoirs, p. 356.

⁵Memoirs, p. 364.

Gaetani remembers a simpler time, when the antimonies were clearer:

"Against us, reaction, and we stood for progress, liberty, the republic, socialism. ... do you remember the radical magazines with a picture on the cover of an athlete breaking his chains, and behind him the sun rising with straight lines for rays ... representing the dawning day....We wrote good books, we created ideological fireworks on mountains of statistics, observations, scientific findings--and we did not suspect that we were passing through the magic gates of hell. Until history descended on us with rains of shrapnel, with dictatorships, propaganda, castor oil, socialist inquisitions, liberating revolutions transformed into tyrannies, abject tyrannies affirming by decree the genius of rational organization, an anti-socialist national socialism, a Bolshevism that exterminated the Bolsheviks. I understand that people should lose their heads and come to believe in chaos, in the perverse nature of man. I say: complexity, maelstrom, and man is in it, weak with his weak little mind, a prisoner of the machines he has built, crushed by the facility of destroying and being destroyed: thirty years of work are needed to make a man and a millionth of a second to destroy a hundred or more of them, without seeing them, by opening a valve in the belly of a bomber. It takes centuries and generations to build a cathedral and a single bomb pulverizes it by mistake in thirty seconds. Don't you regret the good old days, Simon?"

Serge (here Ardatov) wants to respond with Spinoza's statement on the function of intelligence, not to deplore but to understand. He comments instead, that this would only be true if we were disembodied minds or we understood intelligence. But Ardatov does respond:

...."Perhaps it's no more difficult to invent a human order, though it's more difficult to bring it about. We were not insane. I agree that we lacked a sense of complexity, that we borrowed an infantile determinism from mechanics and a blind optimism from the prosperous bourgeoisie. Our apparent error was to be neither devious nor skeptical. We anticipated too much, we thought in terms of diagrams, and our diagrams were muddled by the daubs and splotches of reality. From the point of view of Sirius, we were right and the events were wrong. Our mistakes were honorable. And even from a point of view less absurdly exalted, we were not so wrong. There is more

falsification of ideas now than real confusion, and it is our own discoveries that are falsified. I feel humiliated only for the people who despair because we have been defeated. What is more natural and inevitable than to be beaten, to fail a hundred times, a thousand times, before succeeding? How many times does a child fall before he learns to walk? How many unknown navigators were lost at sea before a Columbus, guided by a magnificent error, could discover new continents? He followed an immense and correct intuition, he groped his way, he was right. If his nerves had weakened like those of his crew, twelve hours or twenty minutes before the discovery, he would have sailed back over the pitiful safe route of true defeat and oblivion. Others would have succeeded at a later date, can we doubt it? -- The main thing is to have strong nerves, everything depends on that. And lucidity."⁶

The Nazis invaded Paris on June 10, and Serge left that day with his son Vlady, Laurette Sejourné, and a Spaniard, Narciso Molins⁷. Their experience is paralleled in the fictional escape of the Russian revolutionary refugee Dr. Simon Ardatov, the German revolutionary socialist [refugee] Hilda, the Spanish Civil War refugee Jose Ortiga and the slightly deranged deserter Laurent Justinien in Serge's novel Les Derniers Temps. Serge, his family and Narciso left on foot, until "a providential taxi" appeared and took them through the Fontainebleau woods, underneath a barrage of shells.

With Europe collapsing behind them, Serge felt a certain relief: he wrote of his "sense of release bordering .. on gaiety."⁸ Serge's isolation and historical marginality could be [just might be] swept away with this new cataclysm. His journey

⁶Serge, The Long Dusk, pp. 317-318.

⁷Narciso, mentioned by first name only in the Memoirs, is described by Danny Benedite (Serge's comrade in Marseilles) as an ex-member of the Executive Committee of the POUM, and a friend of Vlady's. Daniel Benedite, La Filière Marseillaise: Un chemin vers la Liberté sous l'occupation, Editions Clancier Guenaud, Paris, 1984, p. 97.

⁸Memoirs, p. 357.

through Vichy France, Marseilles and on to the 'New World' was solitary, in the sense that he was alone in the world with his sense of history and his revolutionary past, alone a vanquished refugee of the revolutionary generation, cast adrift in a Europe where the Gestapo and the GPU hunted him, and the Social Democrats glanced askance.

The crew of four were in need of sanctuary and Serge remembered his "Socialist" friends who had visited him in Paris and offered to reciprocate should the situation in Paris get too 'disagreeable.' However, as Serge blithely noted, Laurette was "hounded, 'ever so politely,' out of a chateau" of a well-to-do anarchist on a day of torrential rain⁹ and when the group entered an abandoned farm in the woods owned by a Socialist journalist¹⁰ friend, he begged them to be off, for surely the Nazis would be right behind them. This so-called socialist journalist friend, Serge related in his Memoirs, had been converted to collaboration with the fascists. Still seeking sanctuary, Serge tried the house of a pacifist author who promised him refuge, only to find "the door ... shut and well-guarded."¹¹

The situation was appalling in a moral sense, since some of those who closed their doors were once refugees themselves. Some of the Spanish Civil War refugees had even become bandits. The concern for personal survival, material comfort and money was, to Serge, another aspect of the defeat.¹² Serge noted that

⁹ Memoirs, p. 359.

¹⁰ In an article which appeared in 1942 in Partisan Review, entitled "On The Eve," which is an earlier fragment of the Memoirs, Serge spoke of this friend "who had been a socialist journalist the day before yesterday, ... now in favor of a strong military government." PR, Vol. 9, #1, Jan-Feb 1942, p. 23.

¹¹ Memoirs, p. 359.

¹² This sentiment is developed in the article "On the Eve" a fragment of the Memoirs translated by Jean Connolly in
(continued...)

with the far left remained the task of survival; the survival of thought, and the survival of solidarity.

Even worse than the defeat, was the knowledge that what was left of the left was shrinking:

"I realized suddenly that we political refugees, we hunted revolutionists, were doubly, triply, beaten at the moment, for many of us were no longer 'of us,' having been defeated and demoralized in the depths of our souls. We had begun to fight among ourselves for a place on the last boat. The extremity of our defeat was this *saue qui peut*. The end of solidarity means the finish of socialism and the workers' movement."

Yet even as some of the left jealously guarded for themselves the last few ways out of the nightmare, there were others who offered their last morsel to share. It is this complex vision of defeat and yet survival of solidarity that Serge evokes in some of his finest writings, both in the Memoirs, the novel The Long Dusk (TLD), and later in Les Annees Sans Pardon. It is the knowledge that the immediate defeat is not a final one, that the knowledge -- the "superabundance of consciousness and will" -- is what is essential. Serge chose to describe this as 'the sense of history.'

The sense of history is vital if the world is to be transformed and it is that very sense, that political-historical consciousness, that threatened the survival of those who held it. The revolutionary generation faced defeat on three fronts: mind, spirit, body. The political defeat was accompanied by a moral defeat, and a physical one, either by physical elimination, or the deprivation of a means of livelihood to sustain physical existence. Serge's novel TLD reflects this giant struggle: not simply the defeat inflicted by the twin totalitarianisms on a collective scale, but the physical, moral

¹²(...continued)

Partisan Review, Jan-Feb 1942. When the Memoirs were finally published in France in 1951 and translated into English in 1963, this fragment was changed. Gone was the longer reflection on the 'triple' defeat, the demoralization, and at the same time, the confident hope of being "on the eve". pp. 23-33.

and political toll it exacted on Serge's individual characters, who dare to try to maintain their sense of history and their human dignity.

As in Serge's novels, so in his life. Now on the run, Serge's precarious financial situation suddenly became more acute. The pressure to survive intact, to write, and simply to eat and to provide is magnified. Serge noticed, in TLD, that there are those who participate in history, think and take risks, while "people who have nothing to do surround themselves with lots of comfort. They take care of themselves."¹³ Those who think, unfortunately, cannot sustain their bodies simply by thought, nor even by writing or participation in history. Ardatov echoes these sentiments:

"a good deal of physical weakness can be overcome by clear thinking, by the will to hold firm, by the sense of history that will bring us revenge, by stubbornness in clinging to one's opinions--yet there are some weaknesses that cannot be overcome. Perhaps the hardest struggle is that between the mind and the (undernourished) flesh which nourishes the mind, exalts it above the flesh and sometimes suddenly debases it."¹⁴

In the Memoirs, Serge comments on the sense of history, which is also the title of an article he wrote for La Wallonie, (7 aout 1937) and an entry in his Carnets (5 Jan. 1944). Indeed this 'sense' is part of what sets this generation of vanquished revolutionaries apart, and prevents them from dissolving into ordinary life. It is not just that this rapidly depleting generation "... have caught a glimpse of man resolving his own history:"¹⁵ the old world is disintegrating and new barbarisms arise amid a terrible apathy and resignation. Well then, perhaps

¹³Victor Serge, The Long Dusk, The Dial Press, New York, 1946, p. 356. Translated from the French original Les Dernier Temps by Ralph Manheim.

¹⁴Serge, The Long Dusk, pp. 61-62.

¹⁵Memoirs, 366-367.

at least this dreadful destruction will seed a renewal -- this is what Serge insinuates:

"Now it is all over: the rotten tooth has been pulled out, the leap into the unknown has been made. It will be black and terrible, but those who survive will see a new world born. There are very few people who have this new sense which modern man is so painfully developing: the sense of history."¹⁶

Serge returned again and again to this theme. He said he learned from the Russian intelligentsia that the "only meaning of life lies in the conscious participation in the making of history."¹⁷ The old Russian revolutionary exiles who Serge grew up with also taught him to "have faith in mankind and to wait steadfastly for the necessary cataclysms."¹⁸ This patience and sense of history became a kind of leitmotif running through all his writing, and thinking. It reflected the maturity of his thought, his personal testament, but included simultaneously a measure of despair over his intellectual and political isolation, and his general optimism on the human condition on its rocky road to a collective, socialist, democratic future. Serge's 'sense of history' became a kind of dialectical expression of the historical crossroads of humanity at the near half-point of the twentieth century. In the novel on the fall of France the twin dangers of fascism and Stalinism have the left cornered, pondering their historic and yet personal significance:

" We are grains of sand in the dune. Sometimes we have a glimmer of consciousness, which is essential but which may well be inefficacious. The dune has curves in its surface, caused by the wind. The consciousness of the thinking grains of sand can do nothing to change them.we must foresee, that it

¹⁶Ibid., pp. 357-358.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 374. Recall also Serge's earlier description of the sense of history, which could also be described as a clear political consciousness, during the age of revolution, in the now far-off twenties: "All we lived for was activity integrated into history; we were interchangeable....Memoirs, p. 177.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 358.

[the world] is moving toward the object of our hopes, passing over our bodies and our skulls on the way. Neither revolutionary rhetoric nor the spirit of sacrifice can compensate for our impotence. The Spanish Revolution was lost in advance...the Popular Front betrayed itself in advance, the European democracies, tender mother of fascism, were defeated in advance by the totalitarian machines; and these last are equally defeated, defeated by the defeated and by the industrial machines of America and Russia, which in spite of themselves will take over the acquisitions of the Nazis, adapting them to the mentality of the Anglo-Saxon democracy and to the spirit, as yet unforeseeable, of an immense revolution seething with contradiction.

In all this, the conscious grains are precious; let us not underestimate ourselves. What counts is always the rise or fall of man. This may be pride, but it sustains us, provided of course, that it be a pride without self-complacency and without concern for appearances. A number of precious grains will be crushed or inexplicably buried. However, a century will not pass before Europe, Euramerica, Eurasia see the birth of a rational, balanced, intelligent organization capable of re-conceiving history and guiding it, and at last attacking seriously the problems of the structure of matter-energy and its galaxies. Human destiny will brighten--"¹⁹

Significantly, the novel is not only about the fall of France and symbolically the defeat of the struggles ushered in by the October Revolution and the fate of the 'shipwrecked' generation: it is also about the birth of the resistance, portrayed in the final chapter. The sense of history is not simply the knowledge that the old generation carries with them, it is also the will to hang on, to struggle, to be the link between the defeated past and the expectant future.

The mature Serge returned to the theme of the sense of history in his notebooks or Carnets, in January of 1944, where he mused that "Men would need a sense of history comparable to

¹⁹Serge, The Long Dusk, pp. 72-73.

the sense of direction of migratory birds."²⁰ Serge wrote that the 'enormous spiritual magnetism of Marx's work' is explicable by this 'revelation of historical sense.' In this later work, Serge defined the sense of history as "the consciousness of participation in the collective destiny, in the constant development of mankind; it involves knowledge, tradition, choice and hence, conviction, it commands a duty -- ... we must live (act) according to this sudden awareness."²¹

Those who carry this historical consciousness become dangerous men, wrote Serge, and thus the sense of history carries a psychological burden: the conflict between instinct and reason/understanding can give rise to panic. This happened in the Moscow trials. Serge had developed his understanding of Freud and psychological studies in these later years in Mexico (when he was writing the Carnets) which is reflected in this essay. Consciousness comes into conflict with a sense of fear or primordial anguish, which then expresses the failure of the sense of history. Serge used Trotsky as an example of an individual endowed with this sense, whose personal courage allowed him to overcome not only fear, but to continue fighting, unfortunately "with arms which had become inadequate." Trotsky, wrote Serge, was characteristic of a "man who endeavors to be integrated to history in order to live and whose spirit is constantly subordinated to the sense of history. He expresses this well in the last pages of My Life."²²

²⁰Victor Serge, Carnets, Actes Sud, Paris, 1985, p. 53. In the original the phrase is "Les Hommes auraient besoin d'un sens de l'histoire comparable au sens de l'orientation des oiseaux migrateurs."

²¹Ibid.

²²Ibid. Serge was right that Trotsky carried this 'historical sense,' as did Serge and other 'genuine' Marxists, who could "look with clear eyes on the worst tragedies, and even in the midst of the greatest defeats he feels himself enlarged by his ability to understand, his will to act and to resist..."

(continued...)

In an essay on "Marxism in Our Time," published in Dwight Macdonald's Partisan Review in 1938, an essay that became a bone of contention in the difficult relationship between Serge and Trotsky,²³ Serge wrote of Marxism's many contributions, and noted:

"Marxism, finally, gives us what I call the 'historical sense'" it makes us conscious that we live in a world which is in process of changing; it enlightens us as to our possible function--and our limitations--in this continual struggle and creation; it teaches us to integrate ourselves, with all our will, all our talents, to bring about those historical processes that are, as the case may be, necessary, inevitable, or desirable. And it is thus that it allows us to confer on our isolated lives a high significance, by tying them, through a consciousness which heightens and enriches the spiritual life, to that life--collective, innumerable, and permanent--of which history is only the record."²⁴

II. 5.15 The Macdonalds, and Marseilles: A shipwrecked continent with too few lifebelts, and too many castaways

Serge came into contact with Dwight Macdonald through the American left literary journal Partisan Review, which Macdonald edited and to which Serge contributed. Serge's contributions to PR span the years 1938-1947. PR paid Serge for his articles,

²² (...continued)

(Serge, Partisan Review, Vol V, No. 3, 1938, p. 27.) There is a certain irony in Serge's exemplifying Trotsky as the consciously awakened historical instrument because in his dispute with Trotsky over Kronstadt, Serge was pleading that Trotsky use his historical sense.

²³Trotsky was venomous in his critique of Serge and his 'petty-bourgeois intellectual' crises. Serge was the 'moralist' Trotsky referred to in his "On Moralists and Sycophants" (Souvarine the sycophant in question). Leaving aside the obvious slander (Serge was hardly petty-bourgeois in classical Marxist categories) the language Trotsky employed was unfortunate at best: even the lyricism with which Serge wrote became an object of derision. See especially Chap. V, Section I, fn 215 above.

²⁴Victor Serge, "Marxism in Our Time," Partisan Review, Vol V, No. 3, August-September 1938, p. 27.

alleviating somewhat his difficult financial circumstances. In November 1939, Dwight Macdonald sent Serge a check for \$38 and remarked: "In these tragic times, I often think of you and wonder about your life in France. You can be sure you still have many friends (unknown to you) and admirers in this country."²⁵ From Fenlac in the Dordogne, Serge remembered this, and wrote to the Macdonalds for help:

By some luck I managed to flee Paris at the very last minute. We have been traveling in freight trains, spending nights in the fields. ...in the Loire country we were so tired that we lay down behind some stones and slept through an entire bombardment. Nowhere, in this completely chaotic world, were we able to find any asylum. Finally the roads were barred and we were stranded in the small village in the south from which I am writing you. I do not think I will be able to remain here since I know no one and have neither roof nor money nor chance of earning anything.

Of all I once owned--clothes, books, writings--I was able to save only what my friends and I could carry away on our backs in knapsacks. It is very little, but fortunately includes the manuscripts which I have already begun. This letter is a sort of S.O.S. which I hope that you will also communicate to my known and unknown friends in America. I have no money for stamps; I will be able to send off perhaps one or two letters, but that is all. I must ask you to immediately undertake some action of material aid for me. I have scarcely a hundred francs left: we are eating only one meal a day and it is a very poor one at that. I don't at all know how we are going to hold out."²⁶

The Macdonalds answered this appeal by setting up the Partisan Review Fund for European Writers and Artists. This was the beginning of Nancy Macdonald's lifelong commitment to the "real heroes and heroines of modern times, who have been victims

²⁵Dwight MacDonald to Victor Serge, Nov. 14, 1939, MacDonald Papers, Yale University.

²⁶Victor Serge to Nancy and Dwight MacDonald, published in Nancy MacDonald, Homage to the Spanish Exiles, Insight Books, New York, 1987, p. 55.

of both Communist and Fascist totalitarianism."²⁷ Victor Serge was the first refugee she helped, and by 1953 she set up Spanish Refugee Aid, a committee that raised and distributed money among 13,000 refugees, mainly political refugees of the Spanish Civil War.

On July 20, 1940, Nancy Macdonald first wrote the American Consul in Marseilles to invite Serge and his family to come to the United States, and to live with the Macdonalds in New York.²⁸ From 1940 well into 1942, the Macdonalds were Serge's lifeline. They corresponded regularly, sent him money, and interceded on his behalf with the State Department in the attempt to get Serge first an American visa, and then simply an American transit visa after his Mexican visa was obtained through the efforts of Julian Gorkin. After Serge and Vlady left France in March 1941, the Macdonalds continued to help Serge financially, and continued their efforts on behalf of Laurette Sejourné and Jeanine Kibalchich, until they were also able to leave France to join Serge in Mexico, in March 1942. The extensive correspondence, collected at Yale University library, measures some five inches in thickness, and is a testament to political and human solidarity. In the Memoirs Serge said a letter he had received from Dwight Macdonald, who Serge had never met, seemed "to clasp my hands in the dark, I can hardly believe it. So then, let us hold on."²⁹

Holding on was the main task. This was Serge's fourth exile, and seventh flight in twenty years. Serge and his entourage successfully navigated the congested roads to Marseilles, only to find they were too late. There were no more lifeboats out. Marseilles was teeming with refugees of all

²⁷ Nancy MacDonald, op. cit. p. 15.

²⁸ Nancy Macdonald to American Consul, July 20 , 1940, MacDonald Papers, Yale Collection.

²⁹ Memoirs, p. 360.

beleaguered Europe, representing most social classes. There was a surfeit of talent and brains, all at the "limit of their nervous resources." The Jews suffered their own particular hell. They all lived, trying to maintain a shred of human dignity, in a "twilight zone of illegality,"³⁰ hunted, harassed and ignored. Being a man of the far left, Serge was shunned and excluded, marginalized and exposed. He commented:

"In drawing up visa-lists, both in America and here, the leading figures of the old exiled parties were, it seems, determined to exclude the militants of the far Left...everybody is making their escape through the political family-network: groupings are of use now only for that purpose. So much the worse for the man of no Party who has dared to think only in terms of Socialism in all its vastness! All of my party, all of it, has been shot or murdered; and so I am alone, a curiously disturbing figure."³¹

And to the Macdonalds on August 14, 1940, Serge added:

"Here is what I must ask of my known and unknown friends in America in order to survive. At present, it is impossible for me to find here work or help (and I am a little handicapped by my 49 years). Therefore the necessity for material aid. The best thing might be for me to collaborate with some one or use some unpublished works which would seem to be of interest to various publics. ...help is needed urgently. I understand that there are certain organizations which help political refugees, only I am outside the old well known groups and they jealously guard for their own people their connections and resources. Being alone and an independent, I have not benefitted by any of these supports and I am not on the lists of the old Russian socialists which have been, I know it, drawn

³⁰MaryJayne Gold, Crossroads Marseilles 1940, p. 169.

³¹Ibid., p. 361. The visa lists drawn up in France that Serge refers to were not the visa lists of Varian Fry's ERC, but of Frank Bohn who was a right wing socialist and the AFL representative in Marseilles. He worked with the ERC, was in fact Fry's first contact, and Fry took over and greatly expanded the work after Bohn returned to the US. See Serge's letters of August 19, August 30, September 7 and October 8, 1940 to the MacDonalDs (Yale Collection), Fry's Surrender on Demand, pp. 7-12, 51-59, 93.

up in America, for help and visas (they include only Mensheviks, social-revolutionaries and Jews). for me there will have to be a separate personal appeal."

And on August 22:

..."the situation becomes more and more difficult...almost untenable: no place of refuge, no resources, no help and difficulties of every kind. I must hold out and again I will make every effort to hold out."³²

Serge also contacted the Mexican Embassy in search of a Mexican visa, and Jewish organizations for help for himself and his comrades and friends.³³

Serge was left to fend for himself in the summer months of 1940, trying to find refuge in Marseilles, dashing off letters to America and beyond. In TLD, Serge described the left, far left and intellectuals

who would have remained famous if only they had had an orchestra, a hospital, a magazine or a party to direct. But having only their brains overloaded with memories and superfluous knowledge, they were less competent at living than the pimps and Sudanese longshoremen, the pretty streetwalkers, the unemployed seaman, the Balkan racketeers..."³⁴

In the Memoirs, Serge described the exiles in Marseilles as

"a beggar's alley gathering the remnants of revolutions, democracies, and crushed intellects. ...Those with the most scars take the shock best. These are the young revolutionary workers or semi-

³²These letters to "Cher Amis" -- the MacDonalds, gave Serge's address as care of Madame Sosnovski, 123 rue Horace Bertin, Marseille.

³³FBI file on Victor Kibaltchiche alias Victor Serge, Item 2-293 dated January 5, 1940 and Item 2-259, August 13, 1940. Here the FBI has obviously made a mistake on dates, since both items are datelined Marseilles, but in January 1940 Serge was still in Paris. It is possible he sought a Mexican visa in Paris in January, though there is no evidence for it.

³⁴Serge, The Long Dusk, p. 307.

intellectuals who have passed through countless prisons and concentration camps...."³⁵

Serge was a professional at being a refugee on the run: it was his main life experience. Others were far less suited; indeed, one need only read MaryJayne Gold's portrait of Franz Werfel and his wife, Alma,³⁶ to see how. The Werfels, talented and refined, old and used to comfort, were physically ill-prepared for flight and horrified by the discomfort of retreat. Serge, on the other hand, had spent so much of his life without security, that he learned to become indifferent to the creature comforts provided by material goods.³⁷

While Serge was in Marseilles, Trotsky was murdered in Mexico, on Aug. 20, 1940. Serge recalled in the Memoirs seeing the news and feeling that this was an appropriate time for the Old Man to go, "the blackest hour for the working classes: just as their keenest hour saw his highest ascendancy."³⁸ To Fritz Brupbacher, Serge wrote on August 23:

"the thought of the tragic event in Mexico City and of that great mind which has just been extinguished, horribly... When I think of the man's high-minded intelligence, of the extraordinary rectitude of his soul, of his rich vitality, all our discords vanish, nothing remains of the quarrels over ideas that divided us, I am stunned, devastated, Trotsky's disappearance leaves me in a singularly perilous position since now I am alone, the last free witness - - more or less -- of a whole era of the Russian revolution -- and the last representative of the men

³⁵Memoirs, p. 362.

³⁶Alma had been married to three of Germany's most gifted men: Gustav Mahler, the composer; Walter Gropius, founder of the Bauhaus school of architecture, and Franz Werfel, novelist and playwright. Gold, p. 180-181. Notwithstanding Gold's observation, it should be noted that Mahler was Austrian, not German.

³⁷Fry, pp. 5-6 and 168-71; Gold 178-199; and Serge 371-2.

³⁸Serge, Memoirs, p. 365.

who, beginning in 1923-1926, defended its essence against Stalin."³⁹

Serge wrote to the Macdonalds on August 22 of having received the terrible news from Mexico, and asked for information about the assassin, and again on August 30, discreetly asking them if they had any news of "L'affaire de Mexico". In another letter on 26 August, Serge connected the Reiss murder, the first attentat on Trotsky and the final act. Serge asked for a photo of the assassin, and also asked the Macdonalds to express to Natalia "toute l'affection ...au'elle inspire a quelques mispereses mais fiales despit des divergences de vues." Serge also mentioned how badly affected Vlady had been by the assassination, and told the Macdonalds that he thought Krivitsky could be very useful in helping them sort out the affair because of his 'experience and intuition.'⁴⁰ It also appears that the Macdonalds tried to help save Trotsky as soon as they heard he had been mortally wounded. They made arrangements to send a fine "brain specialist" to Mexico City, but it was "too late." Trotsky died within 24 hours.⁴¹

The death of Trotsky, followed a few months later by the death of Krivitsky in suspicious circumstances, suddenly made Serge's situation⁴² even more dangerous, as he intimated in his letter to Brupbacher (above). MaryJayne Gold noted that no one talked anymore of Serge's paranoia. In fact, Serge was on the

³⁹Serge to Brupbacher, Brupbacher papers, Zurich. Cited in unpublished mss "Victor Serge and Leon Trotsky: Relations 1936-1940," by Richard Greeman, p. 37.

⁴⁰VS to the MacDonalds, 26, Aug. 1940, MacDonald Papers, Yale University.

⁴¹Nancy Rodman MacDonald to Victor Serge, Sept. 30, 1940. This letter was written in a cryptic style, but apparently did not reach Serge, at least this copy. (The letter was sent in duplicate to Marseilles and Lisbon.) It was returned to the MacDonalds from Lisbon in December of 1940.

⁴²Serge, along with Natalia Sedova, were the only Russian Left Oppositionists still alive outside the USSR.

GPU's hit list, as we noted earlier. Zborowski aka Etienne, Stalin's trusted agent in the Left Opposition circle in Paris, operated in the larger NKVD French network headed by Sergei Efron and his wife, the Russian poet Marina Tsvetayeva. Efron coordinated plans to 'hit' Henrik Sneevliet and Victor Serge, but were unable to accomplish their task.⁴³

The need to get out of Europe was ever more urgent and Serge wrote the Macdonald's that he received a letter from Julian Gomez Gorkin who said he could obtain a Mexican visa for Serge, (Aug. 26) but Serge preferred to go to the US. Serge was also adamant that he would not go unless Vlady also got a visa since Vlady had no passport. After the death of the Old Man, Serge continued,

"Je me sens -- par simple logique--sensiblement plus menace qu'auparavant; c'est une raison pour hater le depart, c'est une raison aussi pour eviter les aventures (depart en mauvaises conditions), c'est une raison de preferer les EU au Mexique -- si l'on a le choix."⁴⁴

II. 5.16 The Emergency Rescue Committee

That summer a group of American citizens who were shocked to learn that a clause in the armistice signed with Germany following the June invasion of France provided for the "surrender on demand" of refugees. France had always been a haven for exiles, whose lives were now threatened. They put together the Emergency Rescue Committee [ERC], whose "sole purpose was to bring the political and intellectual refugees out of France before the Gestapo and the Odra and the Seguridad got

⁴³See, inter alia, Victor Alba and Stephen Schwartz, Spanish Marxism versus Soviet Communism: A History of the POUM, Transaction Books, New Brunswick, 1988. pp. 220-221.

⁴⁴Serge to MacDonalds, Oct 7, 1940 (MacDonald papers, Yale University).

them."⁴⁵ The committee drafted Varian Fry, a Harvard graduate who had been shocked by what he saw in Germany in 1935, to move to Marseilles to get them out.

Fry linked up with Danny Benedite, his British wife Theo, and Jean Gemahling in Marseilles. Benedite was a left wing Socialist who had met Serge in 1936, while working in the Police Prefecture, and had helped Serge get a French residence permit.⁴⁶ In 1940, he and his comrade-in-arms Jean Gemahling were demobilized from the British division of the Allies and sent to unoccupied France. There they began to work in the French office of the Emergency Rescue Committee [ERC], known as Centre Americain de Secours [CAS]. Their work essentially constituted the humble beginnings of the *maquis*, or Resistance.⁴⁷ A family friend of the Benedites, MaryJayne Gold, an American heiress living in Europe since 1929, became involved in the work of the committee, and quietly financed much of the operations.⁴⁸

⁴⁵The secret police of Nazi Germany, fascist Italy and Francoist Spain. See Surrender on Demand, Varian Fry, Random House, New York, 1945, pp. ix-x.

⁴⁶Daniel Benedite, typescript, pp. 1-2. [Obtained through Richard Greeman]

⁴⁷Indeed, in a letter Serge wrote to Danny Benedite from Mexico on 22 June 1946, Serge commented, "Ce fut un beau commencement! Ce fut en verite la toute premiere Resistance, bien avant que le mot n'ait apparue." ["It was a beautiful beginning! It was in truth the very first Resistance, well before the word had appeared."] Victor Serge to Danny Benedite, 22 June 1946, published in Carnets, pp. 157-163.

⁴⁸Serge's novel of the fall of France is drawn from the people and experiences in Marseilles. Danny and Theo Benedite's experiences in the Resistance are represented in the final chapter of The Long Dusk, and both Varian Fry and MaryJayne make an appearance on page 250, where Serge describes the work of Jacob Kaaden and the 'aid committee.' Kaaden was in the business of obtaining visas and met 'a blonde young de Gaullist' who was negotiating to buy a boat to get refugees out.

From August 1940 until September 1941 when Fry had to leave France against his will, the ERC/CAS was in the business of rescuing, under the nose of the Gestapo, hundreds of anti-Nazi refugees by legal and illegal means, the endangered species of talent and intellect, Jewish and non-Jewish, political or otherwise. The work of the committee continued until June 1942, and dealt with 2000 cases, some 4000 endangered human beings. The rescued included artists, writers, publishers, editors, scientists, philosophers and political militants. Victor Serge was one of them.

Serge had written in his Memoirs that "if it had not been for Varian Fry's American Relief Committee, a goodly number of refugees would have had no reasonable recourse open to them but to jump into the sea."⁴⁹ As it turned out, some did commit suicide, including Walter Benjamin, and possibly Rudolf Hilferding, who was a client of the Committee. The Committee had secured Hilferding and Rudolf Breitscheid visas [that most impossible and precious commodity] and places on a boat, but they were arrested on their way out, turned over to Vichy officials and then to the Nazis. Hilferding was found hanging from a hook in the Sante prison the day he was to have been turned over to the Germans. The Nazis killed Breitscheid in 1944.⁵⁰ The anti-Nazi lawyer Alfred Apfel who had worked on Hilferding and Breitscheid's cases himself came to Fry's office the day they heard that Breitscheid and Hilferding had been arrested. Fry warned Apfel to be careful himself, at which point Apfel was stricken by a fatal heart attack.⁵¹ Gold related that Fry felt responsible and had nightmares for weeks.

⁴⁹Serge, Memoirs, p. 362.

⁵⁰For the accounts of their fate, see MaryJayne Gold, pp. 302-305, Serge Memoirs p. 364, and Fry, pp. 170-178.

⁵¹Fry p. 176-177, Serge p. 365, Gold, p. 305.

II. 5.17 Villa AirBel -- Chateau Espere-Visa

In the Indian summer of October 1940, Mary-Jayne Gold found a Villa just outside Marseilles as a place of refuge from the overwhelming pressure of the Committee's work. It was originally intended to be a home for Mary-Jayne and the Benedites, Danny, Theo and their son Pierre. Varian Fry, however, also needed respite from the tremendous pressure, and Jean Gemahling as well. Villa Air-Bel, as it was known, was outside of Marseilles but on the tramline. It was huge and yet "dirt cheap,"⁵² a marvelous early 19th Century bourgeois eighteen room estate with three floors, a beautifully decorated and intelligently stocked library, grounds with a garden, a cow for milk, in sum, an "ideal country estate," ready, in Mary-Jayne's words, for a large "Victorian family" to move right in. A 'large political family' was about to.

Like most of the other refugees in Marseilles, Serge had been living in one hotel after another.⁵³ When Danny Benedite invited Serge to join them at Air-Bel, Serge replied:

"J'accepte avec joie, d'autant plus que mes logeurs commencent a me trouver encombrant -- et peu remunerateur. Mais vous savez, Danny, que je ne suis pas seul; il y a aussi ma compagne, Laurette Sejourne, et mon fils Vlady"...

--"Pas le moindre probleme....

--"Savez-vous qu'Andre Breton est a Marseille, lui aussi tres precieusement installe? Il passe pour etre un homme difficile mais je peux vous garantir qu'il est charmant et d'une frequentation reellement enrichissante. Pourriez-vous l'heberger? Mais il n'est pas seul, lui non plus, il a sa femme et sa fille avec lui."⁵⁴

⁵²Mary Jayne Gold, op. cit., p. 242.

⁵³Benedite, p. 54.

⁵⁴Benedite, p. 58. Translation: "I accept with joy, especially as my landlord is beginning to find my presence bothersome and unrewarding. But you know, Danny, I'm not alone: there are also my companion, Laurette Sejourne, and my son, Vlady." "No problem. Even with other co-workers from the
(continued...)

This concern for the fate of other refugees peppers all of Serge's correspondence in the period. He was preoccupied with the intolerable situation for the Spanish refugees, and wrote the Macdonalds that something must be done for the POUMistas Juan Andrade⁵⁵, Wilebaldo Solano⁵⁶, and Narciso Molins, who were in danger. Serge was particularly concerned for the safety of Elsa Reiss, widow of Ignace Reiss who was murdered by the GPU in Switzerland in 1938.⁵⁷

Villa Air-Bel became a "wonderful haven"⁵⁸ for those waiting for visas. Mary-Jayne Gold, the Benedites, Jean Gemahling, and Varian Fry from the ERC (as well as Miriam

⁵⁴(...continued)

American committee, there will be extra room." "Did you know that Andre Breton is here? He has a reputation for being difficult, but I assure you he's a charming man whose company is truly enriching. Could you put him up?..But he's not alone either. He has his wife and his little daughter with him."

⁵⁵Serge wrote Nancy MacDonald that Andrade was suffering with tuberculosis in the prison of Montauban in Vichy-ruled France. Serge fictionalized Andrade's predicament in TLD. See correspondence, Oct. 7 1940, and Nancy MacDonald, op. cit., p. 45.

⁵⁶Poumista who had visited Serge in Paris in 1937.

⁵⁷MacDonald-Serge Correspondence, Yale University: Serge to MacDonald, 30 Aug. 1940; Nancy MacDonald to Serge, Sept. 9, 1940 and Oct. 30, 1940. When Serge first wrote to the MacDonalDs nothing had yet been done about Elsa Reiss-Poretzky, but by Oct. 7, 1940, Serge was able to write to the MacdonalDs that Elsa was in Lisbon, on her way to the US. The Mensheviks had been active helping her, though without much success. Serge continued,

"mais elle n'en attendait pas de resultat favorable, soit qu'elle fut encline a tout voir en noir, soit qu'elle connut l'egoisme de clan des hommes qui-lui avaient promis de s'occuper d'elle. Elle est tres amere, lasse de tout, fatiguee des petites miseres morales qui ne nous ont pas ete epargnees. Elle pourrait revivre et faire preuve d'intelligence et de courage si au contact de camarades moins uses, elle reprenait espoir." Serge to MacDonalDs Oct. 7, 1940.

⁵⁸Varian Fry, op.cit., pp.113-122.

Davenport, Msr. Maurice⁵⁹ and Gussie) were joined in the villa by Andre Breton (dean of Surrealism) and his vivacious wife Jacqueline and their young child, Aube, and Victor Serge, his companion Laurette Sejourne, and Serge's 20 year old son Vlady, who stayed there much of the time. Serge's young daughter Jeanine was already ensconced with friends in Pontarlier (near the Swiss border),⁶⁰ and Serge was not to see her for nearly two years.

The Villa AirBel was renamed Chateau Esperevisa by Serge, "for that was the precious commodity in which the Secours Americain dealt and for which so many hoped and waited."⁶¹ They stayed five months, in a pleasant atmosphere of camaraderie, work, political discussions and surrealist games -- which brought the famous French surrealists of the Parisian "Deux Magots" crowd to Chateau Espervisa on Sunday afternoons -- as well as police surveillance, food and fuel rationing.

Three of the residents of Villa Air-Bel have memorialized the experience, and their various descriptions of Serge are worth noting. Varian Fry, who published Surrender on Demand in 1945, and an entirely rewritten version entitled Assignment Rescue in 1968, described Serge as

"a dyspeptic but keen-minded old Bolshevik... During his long career, he had evolved from an extreme revolutionary to a moderate democrat. At the house he talked for hours about his experiences in Russian prisons, recalled conversations with Trotsky, or discussed the ramifications and inter-relations of the European secret police, a subject on which he had a

⁵⁹"Maurice" was the name adopted by the young Rumanian doctor Marcel Verzeanu. He was brought on staff at the ERC because so many of "our intellectual customers were having nervous breakdowns" that Fry thought it wise to have a doctor on staff to treat them. Fry, op. cit., p. 103.

⁶⁰Jeanine Kibalchich, letter to Suzi Weissman, 21 Sept. 1990.

⁶¹Gold, p. 244.

vast store of knowledge. Listening to him was like reading a Russian novel...."⁶²

Mary Jayne Gold wrote "When Danny brought Victor Serge to the chateau I was thrilled to meet a real Marxist--after all that talk."⁶³ In an interview with John Eden in July 1989, Mary Jayne recalled "it was quite exciting to hear Victor speak about his life in Russia." He had "the manners of a prince," he "walked and moved like a gentleman" and "yet he had been a communist, a revolutionary since birth..." In her memoir, Mary-Jayne wrote that both Breton and Serge "had almost courtly old-school manners, so that when I asked Danny how it happened that our two revolutionaries were so *ancien regime*, he simply replied that they liked ladies of goodwill."⁶⁴ She remembered how considerate he was and was particularly impressed with what he said on a number of occasions when asked if he were Jewish: with "his innate sense of delicacy and comprehension," he would say, "It happens that I am not."⁶⁵ As to Serge's physical appearance, Mary-Jayne wrote

"He was about fifty years old, with finely drawn features surmounted by a bristling crew cut. He wore a dark gray flannel jacket, loosely fitting, which buttoned, Russian fashion, up close to the chin. When Victor told us his stories in the evening as we all huddled around the porcelain stove in the library, his face took on another expression because he spoke of a time when the future direction of the revolution was being played out. On such occasions he held us all in respectful silence."⁶⁶

⁶²The quote is a composite from the two editions of Fry: Surrender on Demand, p. 115, and Assignment: Rescue, p. 120.

⁶³Gold, p. 247.

⁶⁴Gold, p. 248.

⁶⁵Interview with Mary-Jayne Gold conducted by John Eden, July 1989.

⁶⁶Gold, pp. 254-55.

Mary-Jayne was surprised to meet Serge's companion Laurette Sejourne, after Serge had told her he was expecting someone "quelqu'une qui m'est tres chere." Mary-Jayne told John Eden that she anticipated "some comrade or somesuch, and this beautiful little women arrives" who looked like a "Luini Madonna." Laurette was 20 years younger than Serge, and very beautiful. Fry described her in contrast to Jacqueline Breton:

"Laurette Sejouren [sic], Victor Serge's friend, was a woman as unlike Jacqueline [Breton] as Jacqueline was unlike everybody else. She was dark and quiet and very reserved. Although she generally stayed in her room during meals, professing not to be interested in food, the servants reported a large consumption of leftovers between meals."⁶⁷

Jacqueline Breton was described as blond, vivacious, sexy and outgoing, while Laurette was reserved and quiet. Still, Mary-Jayne recalled problems between Serge and Laurette, who was much younger and flirtatious, and thought that Serge was jealous. They often stayed in their room for dinner.

Danny Benedite recalled that even with the tension that existed at Air-Bel, due to their dangerous situation and their internal personal and political conflicts, the atmosphere was relaxing. He and Serge explored the gardens, counting 45 different trees and bushes, Andre Breton collected insects, which he sometimes used in his games, and Varian Fry observed the birds. They all used the library. Everyone spent time in their respective rooms working. Serge was writing The Case of Comrade Tulaev, Breton was writing Fata Morgana. Vlady spent much of his time sketching on the terrace. At night they gathered to listen to Serge or Breton read the pages they had written, to have political discussions or to play games. Both Serge and Breton circulated their books, which were read by all.⁶⁸

⁶⁷Fry, p. 121.

⁶⁸Daniel Benedite, op. cit., pp. 116-128.

When the food situation became worse in December and meals were particularly sparse, Serge would recite his various prison adventures. They had political discussions all the time. Jean Gemahling was the only Gaullist, and the rest were leftists, with the two Americans learning. Mary-Jayne Gold remembers it was Vlady who first aroused her curiosity about Marxism.⁶⁹ Danny recalled Serge and Vlady arguing over the character of the Vichy regime, which Vlady insisted was 'simply fascist.' Serge corrected him, saying that

"Il n'y a aucun des elements ... positifs (j'hésite a employer le mot) du fascisme. C'est un melange de tendances monarchistes, clericales et militaristes, l'expression d'une societe a bout de souffle qui se dissout dans la onte et le masochisme."⁷⁰

Serge had a major political influence on Danny Benedite, who described him:

"Victor...dans sa cinquantieme annee, est le doyen affectueusement repecte. Il a les traits fins, les cheveux gris et flous plantes haut sur le front, des lunettes a monture d'acier, la voix douce et des gestes mesures. Son aspect physique, ses manieres distinguees sont d'un clergyman anglo-saxon de bonne race et je n'ai jamais ete tente de voir en cet ancien compagnon de Lenine "une vieille demoiselle a principes", comme le decrira plus tard Claude Levi-Strauss.... Pour quelques-uns d'entre nous, il incarne la Revolution et ses prestiges, pour les autres il personnifie un socialisme humaniste farouchement oppose a celui que le stalinisme a compromis, perverti et devoye. Je connaissais Victor depuis quatre ans, alors qu'il venait d'arriver a Paris, dernier oppositionnel libere d'URSS par une campagne internationale de protestation avant que ne s'ouvre le premier proces de Moscou.Serge se trouvait pris

⁶⁹Vlady was a passionate and fanatical Marxist, Gold wrote, but he was adept in the ways of survival as well (remember he had been with Serge in Orenburg.) When food became quite scarce, Vlady collected dried fruits and nuts and made them into rolls and sold. Mary-Jayne wrote: our Marxist theoretician was openly engaged in a small private enterprise. In a period of near famine his fruit rolls stand out in my memory as a gastronomic delight." Gold, pp. 308-309.

⁷⁰Benedite, p. 128.

dans les feux croises des gens de droite du fait de ses antecedents revolutionnaires et des communistes pour lesquels il etait un abominable 'trotskysto-fasciste'. Cet homme, constamment calomnie, souvent menace, qui montrait dans les epreuves une etonnante egalite d'humeur et accueillait avec une grande dignite les injures dont on l'abreuvait, etait devenu l'un de mes meilleurs amis."⁷¹

Benedite wrote that Serge and Breton were the stars⁷² at Air-Bel, and though they were both of the far left, "more or less Trotskyists" according to Mary-Jayne Gold, there were tensions between them. Danny Benedite was less enthused with Breton as he didn't think much of the surrealist movement, but Serge had recommended Breton be with them, and that was enough. Danny wrote: "Serge etait notre conscience, Breton sera notre animateur."⁷³

On Sundays the Air-Bel was transformed with the arrival of Breton's surrealist friends. The Parisian cafes seemed to be

⁷¹Benedite, p. 116-117. Translation: "in his fiftieth year, [he] was the affectionately respected elder statesman. He had finely-chiseled features, soft grey hair growing out of a high forehead, steel-framed glasses, a soft voice and measured gestures. His physical appearance and his distinguished manners were those of a well-bred Anglo-Saxon clergyman, but I have never been tempted to see in this former comrade of Lenin 'a scrupulous old maid' as Claude Levi-Strauss later described him. ... For some of us, this man [who summed up all the tendencies of the turn-of-the century workers' movement,] incarnated the Revolution and its prestige; for others he personified a humanist socialism fiercely opposed to the socialism that Stalin had compromised, perverted and depraved. I met Victor four years ago, when he arrived in Paris, the last oppositionist let out of the USSR after an international campaign of protest before the first Moscow trial... Serge was caught in the crossfire between the men of the right who made use of his revolutionary antecedents and the communists for whom he was an abominable 'trotsko-fascist.' This man, constantly slandered, often threatened, revealed an astonishing even-temperedness in these trials and accepted the insults that were hurled at him with great dignity, had become one of my best friends."

⁷²Daniel Benedite, op. cit., p. 116

⁷³Benedite, p. 118.

reconstituted at the Chateau. The visitors included Oscar Dominguez, Herold Blumer, Victor Brauner, Wifredo Lam, Max Ernst, Frederic Delanglade, Georges Dumas, Boris Voline (the Russian anarchist), Pierre Herbart, Andre Gide, Jean Malaquais, and others. The Chateau became well known for the surrealist games they played. The games had a history in surrealist circles, as a technique to "reach the inner and lost realities and to liberate the mind from the bonds of occidental logic. The games also achieved that curious juxtaposition of incongruities in which the surrealists detected profound and unexpected meanings."⁷⁴ In Air-Bel, the games were mainly a distraction from trouble and danger. Serge joined in, but evidently didn't think much of this side of Breton. According to Mary-Jayne:

" although Breton and Serge had publicly supported each other politically there was often considerable tension between them. Both were revolutionaries, but Victor had lived through the revolution in the streets of Moscow and Leningrad, not Paris. From a literary point of view they were incompatible. Victor wrote in a sensitive, realistic style that to Andre was meaningless, and he was intolerant of what he considered to be Andre's flirtation with the Beyond. ...Victor Serge was the only one of the boarders to whom this present adventure was a way of life....To me his books are much more moving and poignant than those of Solzhenitsyn because Victor Serge had been with them. He was of them.

Victor had somehow managed to live through what he hoped would change life on this planet. Since his early days he had seen his friends and comrades executed or assassinated or diplomatically commit suicide. Perhaps he had reason to be irritable and dyspeptic at times. Those who disliked him called him paranoid. After Trotsky's assassination there was less talk of paranoia.

One day when he and Laurette and I were crossing over the port ... halfway over he glanced back furtively once or twice. Then he turned to me and said apologetically, 'You will have to excuse me, I have been followed so often....It's an old Bolshevik habit, a habit one does not lose easily'....at the cafe he

⁷⁴Gold, p. 251. Fry also described the games, 115-116.

chose the last table and sat with his back to the protecting wall."⁷⁵

Even at Air-Bel, suspicions arose amid the terrible atmosphere of an "expiring bourgeois world." Rumors were rife, and one day Miriam told Mary-Jayne that a prominent Menshevik, also a client of the Committee, "has told me that Victor Serge is a Stalinist agent. You will have to tell Varian." Mary-Jayne wrote that neither of them believed the rumor, but "we had both learned recently from Serge himself that Stalinists were capable of anything and that in a revolutionary situation only the cause mattered." Mary-Jayne told Varian about the rumor, and he said, with a guffaw, "My God, how these Russians intrigue!"⁷⁶ With Trotsky murdered and Krivitsky's suspicious demise, Mary Jayne Gold wrote that no one talked anymore of Serge's paranoia.

The heightened GPU work outside the Soviet Union began to threaten Serge vitally. Varian Fry's relationship with the French authorities and the American Embassy become strained as the French Communist Party took advantage of "French government's inherent fear of revolutionaries" and mounted a campaign of slander, accusing Fry of Trotskyism. Serge's presence at Air-Bel finally compromised the work of the committee, as Varian Fry and the ERC were being labeled Trotskyist. MaryJayne Gold admits "they thought of themselves as Trotskyists" but this label was a liability in an agency dealing with the State Department. Fry eventually had to ask Serge to leave the villa. Serge scarcely mentioned this in his Memoirs, but Mary-Jayne was quick to point out the evil Stalinist hand behind this ugly slander. Mary-Jayne's gangster boyfriend, who hated all the intellectuals at the villa except

⁷⁵Gold, pp. 253-255.

⁷⁶Gold, pp. 246-247. Although Gold never names the prominent Menshevik, it could have been Boris Nikolaevsky, who had been with Serge in Paris, where doubts about him also surfaced from Elsa Reiss Poretsky, and Lola Estrine Dallin, a close associate of Nikolaevsky.

Serge, was devastated. He said, "I'm just as good as any of your friends, but next to a guy like Serge I'm a shit. Just a shit."⁷⁷

Serge was shattered that he had to leave, and though his Mexican visa had just come through thanks to Julian Gorkin's work in Mexico and the Macdonalds in New York, no visa was yet obtained for Vlady or Laurette and Jeanine, nor was it clear if he could travel through Spain, Portugal, and Cuba.⁷⁸ Serge wrote to the Macdonalds on Jan. 5, 1941 from a hotel in Marseilles:

"Notez notre nouvelle adresse. Sur le plan personnel, tout s'est beaucoup et facheusement complique pour moi. Nous avons loue avec de bons amis, parmi lesquels Andre, une villa abandonnee aux environs de la ville; des amis qui se trouvent etre les collaborateurs de Mr. F. y habitent avec nous, mais on a mene toute une intrigue pour nous obliger a nous separer, sous le pretexte que les collaborateurs de l'Em. Rescue Comm. pourraient etre compromis par leurs relations etroites avec moi! L'enorme en tout ceci, c'est qu'en depit de la clarte des choses et de la profonde estime qui nous reunit tous, cela ait reussi, par suite de l'atmosphere. Je me retrouve donc devant le probleme du logement et i est lie a beaucoup d'autres. Vous suivez sans doute mieux que nous les evenements qui compliquent encore les problemes personnels. Mais a cet egard, je ne suis pas pessimiste du tout."⁷⁹

⁷⁷Serge had told Killer of his exploits and prison sentence with the Bonnot gang, which endeared him to Killer for all time. Serge told MaryJayne he liked Killer because "he reminds me of myself when I was young." Gold, p. 286. Killer later become the model for Serge's character Laurent Justinien in his novel The Long Dusk.

⁷⁸Nancy MacDonald to Laurette Sejourne, Dec. 6, 1940, and throughout Dec. 1940. (MacDonald Papers, Yale University.)

⁷⁹Serge to MacDonalds, 5 Jan. 1941. Trans: "Note our new address. On the personal side, everything has become distressingly much more complicated for me. We had rented with some good friends, among them Andre, an abandoned villa in the outskirts of town; of the friends living there with us were the collaborators of Mr. F, but a whole plot has been woven in order
(continued...)

Despite the extremely difficult new circumstances, including a particularly severe winter amid food and fuel shortages on top of a lack of funds, Serge did not allow pessimism to overtake him. Mary-Jayne informed Miriam Davenport of Serge and Sejourne's departure in a cryptic letter dated Jan. 30, 1941, stating "There was a terrific Committee crisis at the villa last week. Laurette, Victor and Vladi had to leave as they were considered not tout a fait, au fait, Social Standing you know."⁸⁰

Prior to Serge's 'expulsion' from the Chateau, one incident at Air-Bel is worth relating. The police arrived at the Villa at the time of the Marechal Petain's visit to Marseilles, with search warrants. They confiscated Serge's pearl-handled revolver -- "a delicate instrument but efficient enough to pierce Victor's brain if the OGPU got too close,"⁸¹ and his typewriter and one of his books, which Serge said they would now use to "try and match the letters of my machine with the Stalinist tracts I am supposed to be writing."⁸² Benedite wrote that the police were aggressive and arrogant and had information about all of the inhabitants. To Serge, they turned and addressed him as Mssr. Serge, or "would you prefer Mr.

⁷⁹(...continued)

to force us to separate, on the pretext that the co-workers of the Emergency Rescue Committee could be compromised by their close relations with me! The enormity in all of this, is that despite the clarity of the scheme and the profound esteem that unites us all, it worked -- as a result of the atmosphere. I am once again faced with the housing problem, and it is tied to many others... You follow without doubt better than us the events that complicate again our personal problems. But in this regard, I am not at all a pessimist."

⁸⁰Gold, p. 307.

⁸¹Gold, p. 266.

⁸²Ibid, pp. 266-267.

Kibaltchiche? It is your real name, no?"⁸³ Having searched the villa, the police arrested the lot of them. In fact the police had asked the AirBel occupants to come to the police station, as a formality. Serge advised his cohabitants that the police always say that. His experiences taught him that a few hours could last days, weeks or even years. Fry said, "good, at least you are always the optimist!"⁸⁴ They were first interrogated, then interned on board the SS Sinaia, along with some 600 other unfortunate souls suspected of possibly causing a disturbance during the Marechal's visit. Some 20,000 were arrested for the four day duration of Marechal Petain's visit to Marseilles. It was December 1940.⁸⁵

The men were taken to the hold, the women given 3rd class cabins. MaryJayne was given a cabin with Laurette and Serge, who "on account of age and a heart condition, was accorded this special privilege." Mary-Jayne related that Serge thought they were doing very well, but nonetheless instructed them on how to be prepared. He took out his handkerchief and showed them how to fold it and place it under the chin so that the skin never touched the dirty wool of the blankets handed out. "Furthermore" went on the old professional, "it is wise to bring something to read. Takes your mind off your troubles. He pulled out a volume from his pocket. 'Merde. It's my own. Here, Mary Jayne. You can have it.' It was Les hommes dans la Prison. 'Re-merde, alors' she said. Thanks."⁸⁶ Varian Fry ended up

⁸³Benedite, p. 143.

⁸⁴Fry's account is in his book, pp. 136-149.

⁸⁵Benedite, pp. 145-147.

⁸⁶Mary Jayne Gold, 273-276. Serge also helped MaryJayne cope with the "evil-looking" food they received aboard, which she had trouble eating: Serge insisted "that in prison one must eat anything and everything one can get down, and moreover one must hold it down. 'You must keep up your strength. You never know how long you will be held.'

with the book in his pocket, with a dedication from Serge "In memory of our common captivity on the Sinaia, and in complete sympathy."⁸⁷.

A few days before Serge and Vlady and the Bretons finally boarded the "Capitaine Paul Lemerle" for Mexico, Fry informed them that Andre Malraux was in Marseilles and asked if Malraux could join them for dinner. Benedite recalled that Serge answered: "Pourquoi pas? J'aimerais assez lui dire ce que je pense de sa collusion avec les staliniens en Espagne."⁸⁸ In any case Serge, Fry and the Benedites dined with Malraux on March 19, 1941 at "Le Dantesque" restaurant in Marseilles. Benedite related that at the meal Malraux listened attentively to Serge's reproaches and agreed that "beaucoup d'erreurs ont ete commises lors de la repression de Mai 1937 en Catalogne."⁸⁹

On 25 March 1941, Serge finally left Europe aboard a ship that he described to Danny as "une boite de sardines sur laquelle on aurait colle un megot!" (Imagine a tin of sardines with a cigarette butt pasted on!)⁹⁰ On board with Serge were the Bretons, Claude Levi-Strauss, and the painter Wilfredo Lam.

II. 5.18 From Marseilles to Martinique to Mexico: The visa hunt, the FBI and Serge

Serge was a difficult case, because his involvement in the Comintern and his membership in the CPSU meant he would never get past the State Departments' application of the reactionary

⁸⁷Fry, p. 146.

⁸⁸Benedite, p. 214.

⁸⁹Benedite, ibid. This was the last time Serge saw Malraux, and it was not a pleasant evening. In 1947, Serge turned to Malraux for help in leaving Mexico, and Malraux published part of Serge's letter to him to make it appear Serge had become a Gaullist. Perhaps he was getting back at Serge for this evening of reproaches?

⁹⁰Benedite, p. 191.

Smith Act, preventing his entrance, even as a stopping off point in the USA.

Although the picture painted by Fry, Gold and Serge of the Rescue Committee is one of their doing everything possible -- Serge commented they were "overwhelmed by work and the appeals from concentration-camps, and in constant peril themselves. As it was, however, this was a shipwreck with too many castaways."⁹¹ A different picture emerges from the Macdonald papers. Dwight and Nancy Macdonald worked incessantly and tirelessly on behalf of Serge and his family. They report less than cordial reception from the American office of the Rescue Committee, made up of democrats and liberals more inclined to save their own than a well known former Bolshevik such as Serge. While it is clear from the various sources that Varian Fry's group in Marseilles was doing everything humanly possible, the New York committee dragged their heels in tandem with the State Department. The Macdonald's were outraged by this and dashed off letters to Frida Kirchway,⁹² editor of The Nation, Eugene Lyons, editor of The American Mercury and anyone else they could pressure to help. On Sept 24, 1940, Dwight Macdonald received a letter from the ERC in New York, saying they could no longer do anything on the case of "Vladimir Kibaltschiche (Victor Serge)" [sic] because of "Serge's previous Communist

⁹¹Serge, Memoirs, p. 364.

⁹²On September 12, 1940, Dwight MacDonald wrote to Frida Kirchway complaining about the New York ERC's "scandalous laxness" in dealing with Serge's "life and death" need for a visa, and suggested that perhaps the ERC was negligent because Serge was both "a left wing anti-fascist and anti-Stalinist." On September 18, 1940, Kirchway replied that the ERC was overworked, but was doing everything it could. She indicated that politics "had nothing to do with the delay" in the ERC handling of the Serge case, but that Serge may be refused a US visa because he "a Communist," even if "an anti-Stalinist Communist." MacDonald Papers, Yale Collection.

affiliations."⁹³ Macdonald resubmitted the case and got letters of support from John Dewey, Eugene Lyons, Sidney Hook, Margaret Marshall, (literary editor of *The Nation*) Meyer Schapiro, Rev. Frederick Reustle, Max Eastman,⁹⁴ and James Farrell. Macdonald insisted that Serge's anti-totalitarian views and writings, his years in Stalin's gulag and his great danger in France should be sufficient reason to give him immediate entry into the US.⁹⁵ The rest of the Macdonald correspondence is filled with more of the same: urgent cables to Serge, checks sent, letters lost, bureaucratic barriers, endless paper trails.

The desperate need for immediate action was frustrated by the sluggish pace of bureaucratic committees, whether they belonged to the State or the 'resistance.'⁹⁶ Serge's case could

⁹³Mildred Adams, Executive SEcretary of New York Emergency Rescue Committee, to Dwight MacDonald, Sept 24, 1940. Yale Collection.

⁹⁴There is a separate correspondence between Serge and Eastman, which found its way into the FBI files, released to this author. The letter from Serge to Eastman, dateline Marseilles, August 14, 1940, appeals to Eastman for material help and help with a visa for Serge and Vlady. Serge stated that he was "one of the last refugees of the Russian Revolution" and expressed the conviction that "a better time is coming after the dark period we are in." Item 2-257, declassified Victor Kibaltchiche alias Victor Serge memorandum for Mr. Foxworth, signed P.J. Wacks, Washington DC, Sept. 23, 1941.

⁹⁵MacDonald to Mr. Warren, Sept 30, 1940, Yale Collection.

⁹⁶For example, the ERC in New York was provided with the necessary affidavits and papers by the MacDonalds, yet these documents needed to pass through various internal committees and subsequent delays before being passed on to the Solicitor General's office in an official visa request. Dwight MacDonald, in frustration, bypassed the committee and went to a lawyer who wrote the Solicitor General directly. See letters of September and October 1940 in Yale collection of MacDonald paper. In 1941 the MacDonald's refugee committee merged with the International Rescue Assoc. (IRA), which focused exclusively on left wing refugees, while the Emergency Rescue Committee focused more on intellectuals and artists.

only be considered when committees met, which was not every day, though he was daily in danger. Once the Mexican visa was finally procured, it came in the wrong name, made out to the pseudonym 'Serge,' not 'Kibalchich' (a problem for Serge's son Vlady Kibalchich),⁹⁷ and listed Serge's nationality as "Spanish" rather than "Russian." Worse, the visa could expire before it made it back and forth across the Atlantic to be corrected. In the meantime, the Macdonalds paid for Serge's passage from Lisbon, which meant Serge had to get to Portugal through Spain. This required an exit permit from France and Portuguese and Spanish transit visas. The problem was that the Franco government would not recognize Mexican documents.⁹⁸ The paper chase became a maze of labyrinthine proportions, yet the Macdonald correspondence demonstrates their dogged persistence in getting through the tangled document web.⁹⁹ In the end, a transit visa was granted, two weeks after Serge managed to board the Paul Lemerle for Mexico.

⁹⁷Vlady did not get a visa with Serge right away. Serge wrote the MacDonalds in a letter of 16 Sept 1940, that if Vlady couldn't accompany him, even though the situation was extremely dangerous, he would not go. Serge explained that Vlady at 20 was at a dangerous age to be in Europe, because of the war. On the other hand, Jeanine, who was nearly six, was safe in a house in Pontarlier and could come later, but "she is the only joy of my life" and Serge hadn't seen her in a year. Serge implored the MacDonalds to get a visa for Laurette, who could bring Jeanine with her. MacDonald Papers, Yale. See also, Jeanine Kibalchich, "Victor Serge, Mi Padre," Unpublished testimonial, Oct. 1990.

⁹⁸This is all documented in the MacDonald collection of papers at Yale, and fairly faithfully summarized in Serge's FBI file.

⁹⁹Dwight Macdonald wrote to Serge on June 2, 1941 that Serge he could only get a US transit visa if he agreed to testify before the Dies Committee. The Dies Committee preceded the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), which made an investigation in 1940 of Communist activity following the Stalin-Hitler pact. In order to get Serge to consider testifying, MacDonald mentioned that the Old Man was willing to testify. (Trotsky had considered testifying to clear his name from the Stalinist slander.)

The visa application process, in the meantime, made Victor Serge known to American intelligence services. While they were doing the step-by-step delay dance, the FBI was investigating Serge. From 1987 to 1989, Serge's FBI file was slowly released to me after two years of persistent correspondence with the FOIA Appeals Office.¹⁰⁰ The FBI file indicated that the US Army, Navy, CIA, FBI, State Department, and Justice Department had all been spying on Serge. It appears that all the correspondence between Serge and the Macdonalds was photographed by the FBI, all the names mentioned investigated, no matter if the correspondence was sent through the mail, clipper, or American Express or telephone, rendering all of the Macdonald's efforts and Aesopian language fruitless. All of the correspondence

¹⁰⁰The following is the record of the replies I received from the various offices of American Intelligence: 1. Letter from Dept of State, Visa Services, 9.25.89; 2. Diplomatic Security Service of Dept of State, 4.10.89; declassified document 65-54550-16, reporting agent Walter S. Pedigo, investigating in Mexico City from April to May 1954 [listing Serge --dead 7 years--as a famous painter living in Mexico]; 3. From Dept of Army, US Army Intelligence and Security Command, 4.16.88; 4. doct #100-236386-3, from HQ Southern Defense Command, Fort Sam Houston, 1 Feb 44. Includes subversive annex on magazine Politics 'a trotskyite organ' mentioning Serge's Mexican group, dated 6-13 Dec. 1946. 5. From the same again, 4 Feb. 1944, names and addresses of Serge and all his associates in Mexico with short bios, plus information on Dwight MacDonald; 6. 24 May 1988, from Defense Intelligence Agency, reporting investigation in Mexico City of 26 March 1946; 7. June 4, 1987, from Defense Intelligence Agency; 8. 10 June 1987, from US Dept of Justice Ap 24, 1987 from FBI; 9. Apr 22, 1987, from US Army Intelligence and Security Command; 10. Mar 2, 1987, from Office of Legal Policy, FBI; 11. 6 Jan 1987, from Dept of Justice, FBI; 12. 20 Nov. 1986, from New York FBI; 13. 17 Nov 1986, from New York FBI; 14. 25 Nov. 1986, from Washington FBI, Dept of Justice; 15. April 29, 1987, from Dept of Navy, Naval Intelligence Command, declassified documents Op-16-f-7, A8-5/QQ/EJ3, Serial No. 0871716, covering reports from August and Sept 1941, Naval Attache in Ciudad Trujillo, Dominican Republic, "political forces, foreign penetration", see report from Intelligence Report 63215 24 Jan 1946, Mexico on Mundo, Serge, Movimiento socialismo y libertad.

between the Macdonalds, Serge and official agencies in France were similarly photographed by American Intelligence.¹⁰¹

Ironically, once the Macdonald's succeeded in getting Serge a temporary transit visa, his belongings were marked USA. The Immigration confiscated Serge's two suitcases, from the SS Boringen, and the FBI assigned special agents to photograph the contents and translators to translate the documents "which were written in foreign languages."¹⁰² The documents were then summarized for the attention of J. Edgar Hoover.

While Dwight and Nancy Macdonald were furiously active on Serge's behalf in New York and the FBI was similarly active paying translators to make Serge's words readable to intelligence agents, [in order to discover legal grounds to deny Serge a simple transit visa through the US], Serge and Vlady sailed out of the nightmare, to a new world and an uncertain future. Although Serge had spent months waiting to leave, he did so reluctantly, "parting only to return." He described the Paul Lemerle as a cargo boat converted "into an ersatz concentration-camp of the sea".¹⁰³ Of the 300 on board, 40 were refugees, including Serge and Vlady, Andre Breton and family, Claude Levi-Strauss, and others. They held meetings on board, and shared their thought and insights. It was also a time of reevaluation, being "on the eve" of a new world and new possibilities. Serge wrote that he was able to faintly grasp the essential, that

"We have not lost after all, that we have lost only for the moment. In the struggles of society we contributed a superabundance of consciousness and will, which greatly exceeded the forces at our command. All of us have behind us a certain number of mistakes and failings, for creative thought of any kind can proceed only with hesitating, stumbling

¹⁰¹ For example, see Item 2-344, letter to Minister of Public Health from Minister of Interior of French Republic dated Feb. 1937.

¹⁰² See FOIA FBI file on Victor Serge, p. 16.

¹⁰³ Serge, Memoirs, p. 366.

steps....Having made this qualification, in accordance with which each must search his heart...."¹⁰⁴

Vlady remembered reading Bukharin and Preobrazhensky's ABC of Communism on deck, when Serge approached somewhat angrily: Serge grabbed the book, and said, "This is not the time for this" and tossed the book into the sea. He added, "You should be studying a Spanish primer, that's what's important now."¹⁰⁵

They docked first in Martinique, where Vlady recalled Vichy officials making the rounds, asking which passengers were Jewish. When a Nazified Vichy official asked Serge [if he were Jewish], he replied "I do not have that honor."¹⁰⁶ In a letter to Mary Jayne Gold, Serge described Martinique as French in form only, but more like 'una specie de Gestapo.' There they were jailed, robbed and threatened (to be shipped to the Sahara, among other things). Their conditions of incarceration were primitive: no running water, having to pay 25f per day for food that was "indescribably filthy."¹⁰⁷

The boat sailed from Martinique to Ciudad Trujillo, the capital of the Dominican Republic, where they stayed for weeks, detained in a concentration camp at Fort of France. It was here in Ciudad Trujillo that Serge was visited by the United States Naval Attache, John A. Butler, Captain of the US Marine Corps, who filed a confidential Intelligence Report on August 14, 1941.¹⁰⁸ The report is short (3 pages), a summary of the

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Interview with Vlady, January 1986, Mexico City.

¹⁰⁶ Interview with Vlady, January 1986, Mexico City.

¹⁰⁷ Serge to Mary-Jayne Gold, Ciudad Trujillo, 1 August 1941, 8pp., Serge Archive, Mexico City.

¹⁰⁸ Obtained by the author from the Department of the Navy, Naval Intelligence Command on April 29, 1987, as the result of a Freedom of Information Act request to the FBI. The file contained Intelligence Reports from agents in Chile, Colombia, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Peru, and the 'Fifteenth Naval (continued...)

discussion that contains the kinds of political inaccuracies that someone unfamiliar with the revolutionary movement would make. Vlady remembered Serge's reaction after the agent left -- he laughed at the kinds of questions the agent asked Serge. Vlady was not present for the interview.¹⁰⁹ In Butler's report, we read that Serge was a member of the "Red General Staff" (Vlady confirmed that Serge had the rank of General in his Soviet Passport), that Serge was a "Social Democrat" who stated that "Trotsky's party disappeared with Trotsky's death." Serge is also reported to have said that Stalin's government would be replaced by a Popular Front government, that the "Red General staff emphasized bacterial warfare" and "built more submarines than publicly admitted." The agent remarked that Serge was "a brilliant, well-trained observer, whose first thoughts are against Stalin, although he is for democracies." Serge is reported to have named Lucien Vogel as a "Communist agent in the U.S." Vogel, according to the report, was one of the Communist agents who were active in the Popular Front, who subsequently escaped to the United States at the time of the German invasion.¹¹⁰ Serge also told the agent that "Without doubt Krivitsky was killed by the OGPU," and that Alexander Barmine and Boris Nicolaevsky could both advise on Russian questions.¹¹¹ Finally agent Butler admitted that Serge was waiting in the

¹⁰⁸(...continued)

District." The document was declassified, but marked 'confidential,' serial No. 0871716, Document #100-36676-5, dated Sept. 30, 1941.

¹⁰⁹interview with Vlady Kibalchich, Mexico City, May 1987.

¹¹⁰Confidential Intelligence Report, Naval Intelligence, Serial R-194-41, Ciudad Trujillo, August 14, 1941, 3 pp.

¹¹¹This is not the indiscretion it appears to be, as both Barmine and Nicolaevsky had already themselves been contacted by American intelligence. Barmine went on to work for the CIA (as an advisor on Soviet affairs), after he served in the American army in World War II, and Nicolaevsky accompanied American Intelligence to Germany in 1945 to retrieve his stolen archive.

Dominican Republic for a transit visa through Cuba enroute to Mexico.

In Ciudad Trujillo, Serge set to work in the tropical August sun, and wrote Hitler contra Stalin in four weeks for a Mexican public, and complained he couldn't sleep for worry about what nightmare was sweeping over Russia. The book's subtitle was "La Fase decisiva de la guerra mundial" and was Serge's first book written in the Americas, dedicated to the combatants and builders of the Mexican Revolution. It also caused the ruin of the small publishing house, Ediciones Quetzal, for publishing this uncompromising anti-Stalinist and anti-capitalist analysis of the Second World War.

Serge wrote to Mary-Jayne Gold from Ciudad Trujillo on 1 August 1941, after finally receiving a letter from her, breaking months of isolation with his European friends. His situation was still 'complicated and dangerous:' his travel visa had expired, and he had no documents to go to Mexico. The State Department "les ha clavado un punal en la espalda a todas las emigraciones anti-fascistas" which meant that only the pro-fascists with their dollars could travel to Latin America. Serge wrote that the committees were sleeping, satisfied with their work. His American visa was granted twice and taken away 20 times.

Serge told Mary Jayne that since the occupation of Bulgaria he had believed the war would turn into a Nazi-Russian conflict, but not as soon as it happened. This showed to Serge that the Nazis couldn't afford to wait (not even for the winter to pass) to 'flatten' Russia. Serge knew that the Russians would defeat the Nazis, "the Russians still have energy in reserve" but what began to worry Serge even more was the 'reactionary spirit' of the Americans and their allies who "seemed to be more afraid of a new Europe than a Nazi Europe." He noted this after listening to Hoover's speech following the Nazi invasion of Russia. He also wrote that he thought the Russians could not last very long due to the misery of the country and state of transport, but he believed that this situation would produce a great change in the

internal situation, which would make possible a war of resistance almost without limit. He also thought that the Stalinists were using their freed up credits to spread their influence "much in the style of the Popular Front." This letter to MaryJayne, and another sent two days later to Dwight Macdonald summarized Serge's thoughts on the imminent Russo-German conflict.

As to his survival in Ciudad Trujillo, Serge wrote that he and Vlady adapted themselves to life around the hot sun: work from dawn to 1pm, Serge writing, and Vlady drawing "spectacularly." Serge told MaryJayne that his "typewriter doesn't rest" in the tropical heat -- because he worked without stop, passing sleepless nights of anxious preoccupation for Laurette, Jeanine, and his comrades left behind. Serge was also made uncomfortable by his state of total dependence on his New York friends (the Macdonalds) for survival. Serge confided to MaryJayne that he hated life without Laurette, and complained that the Mexican comrades didn't seem to pay attention to how important it was to have a couple together, that the single life was not for him. Serge had even suggested at one point to Nancy Macdonald that if the visas for Laurette and Jeanine did not come together, that Laurette should come first, then Jeanine with Laurette's son Rene.¹¹²

II. 5.19 From Mexico, Whither the USSR, the World?

In the introduction to the first section of chapter five infra, I outlined Serge's Mexican activities and contacts. This

¹¹²Serge to Nancy and Dwight MacDonald, June 7, 1941. Nancy MacDonald replied on the 12th June 1941 that the visas for Laurette, Jeanine and Rene had come through. Laurette's son Rene, in fact, never made the journey, as the war made it too dangerous for Laurette to go collect him in Italy. He was left in Italy, and raised there by his grandmother. He finally came to Mexico as an adult, full of hostility for his mother for having 'abandoned him.' Interview with Jeanine Kibalchich, Mexico, Sept. 1990.

is a rich chapter in Serge's life and thought: Serge wrote in profusion, considered new ideas and new directions, became involved in "Socialism and Liberty," which first published Analysis, and then Mundo. The group was an entirely heterogeneous collection of exiles from Russia, France, Spain and Germany, each bringing their own experiences, traditions and defeats. Serge and Vlady became political antagonists in this group, which later split due to internal divisions.¹¹³ Serge was continually persecuted by the GPU, through its Mexican agents, who had the ignominious dishonor of having been involved in the assassination of Leon Trotsky just a year before.

The persecution grew from vicious slander into a physical threat to Serge's life, which has been documented in the FBI files, here described in footnotes 21 and 22 of Chapter Five, section one. After Serge, Gorkin and the others were physically attacked by Communist thugs and GPU agents, Serge, Pivert, Gorkin and Regler wrote a book to publicize their situation and protect themselves. What is remarkable in this booklet, La GPU Prepara Un Nuevo Crimen, apart from the appended letters of solidarity which were signed by hundreds of North American and British intellectuals, including MPs and the Governor of the State of California,¹¹⁴ is the short replies each of the

¹¹³ According to Vlady, his rebellion was as much the immature rebellion of a son trying to carve his own path against the wisdom and experience of his father. (Interview, August 1990) The other divisive element in the exile group was Jean Malaquais, the French novelist, who incorporated this experience into his novel World Without Visa (Doubleday & Co.) New York, 1948.

¹¹⁴ The last section of the book was filled with documents demonstrating the solidarity of individuals and organizations expressed with these exiled revolutionaries. The American progressive press, including The Nation, Partisan Review, The Militant, The New Leader, and The Call all came to their support. Norman Thomas dedicated his half hour radio program to them, the Israeli newspapers of New York assumed their defense, as did many other newspapers and magazines, including The New
(continued...)

slandered wrote to refute the calumnious charge of being Fifth Columnists. In the initial statement, they answered the charges that they were "Trotskyites." The statement declared that while they admired the great revolutionary¹¹⁵ they never belonged to the Trotskyist movement, except Serge who had belonged to the Soviet Left Opposition, had translated Trotsky, and energetically defended the Old Man in the Moscow Trials. They wrote that they had each separated from Trotsky over questions of philosophy, history, and organization.

While Gorkin and Pivert sought to refute the charges that they were Trotskyites, Serge chose instead to stress his life of obstinate resistance to lies, falsehoods and despotism, from Petrograd to Orenburg to Rheims to Mexico and the terrible consequences he suffered in the form of years of captivity. He ended by declaring:

"I will continue in the service of mankind, liberty, and the Russian Revolution which still beats once more for the liberty of the world. I hope with firmness that it will be renewed, liberated from totalitarianism, and with the right to a great future."¹¹⁶

Serge's statement was quite different than Gorkin's, Pivert's, and Regler's, all of whom responded to the outrageous charges against them by denying their links with Trotskyism. Serge, on

¹¹⁴(...continued)

York Times. Only the Daily Worker and New Masses, both Communist organs, attacked them. Hundreds of prominent American intellectuals addressed a letter to President Avila Camacho which was included in La GPU prepara un nuevo crimen! (pp. 54-57). Apart from the Governor of the state of California's signature on the appeal, from Great Britain came another appeal, signed by three Labour Ministers, three Independent Ministers, and many well known writers, trade unionists, and the leadership of the ILP.

¹¹⁵Serge, Gorkin, Pivert and Regler, La GPU prepara un nuevo crimen!, Serie "Documentos," Edicion de "Analysis" (Revista de Hechos e Ideas), Mexico DF, 1942, p. 16.

¹¹⁶Ibid., p. 21.

the other hand simply recounted his life of fidelity to revolutionary truth and wisdom, and to the hope of the future.

A full account of Serge's activities and writings from Mexico would require another dissertation. To conclude this study of Serge's activities and reflections drawn from his Soviet experience, I would like only to offer a select panorama of his last published and unpublished essays, written from his final exile, where Serge was poor, isolated, and "indescribably lonely."¹¹⁷

In an entry in his personal diary, Serge lamented his political and literary isolation, writing "for the drawer at over fifty," and realizing that the present dark world situation might outlast his lifetime. He noted that in "this free land of America" he was writing as the Russians did around 1930, and that he had "reached the stage of asking myself if my name alone will be an obstacle to publication."¹¹⁸ While his novels and Memoirs did not see publication before his death (except The Long Dusk, published in Canada in 1946), Serge did publish much of his journalism in small reviews in the US and France. Yet there are many worthwhile pieces left in Serge's archive in Mexico, which were never published.

In the United States Serge was read and promoted by Dwight Macdonald and his journal, Politics, as well as Partisan Review, and by Daniel Bell and David Dallin at the New Leader, where Serge was the Mexican correspondent. He was also listed as an international contributor to Modern Review, a Menshevik-oriented journal largely financed by the International Ladies Garment Workers Union. His articles also appeared in the New International, all the more so after its takeover by Max Schachtman's Workers Party in the 1940 split in the American Section of the Fourth International. The New International

¹¹⁷Serge to Marcel Martinet, no date, Mexico archive.

¹¹⁸Serge, Carnets, "Difficulty in Writing, Russian Writers, 10 Sept 1944, p. 134.

printed excerpts of Serge's Memoirs, Year One, and seven excerpts from his diary, or Vieux Carnets.¹¹⁹ Serge was also published in Socialist Call, Horizons, Espana Libre (New York), and in Mexico in Analysis, Mundo, Rumbo, La Nacion, Excelsior, El Informador, and others. In Cuba, Serge was the subject of a long article in Bohemia.¹²⁰ Serge also carried on a rich correspondence with Sidney Hook, Dwight and Nancy Macdonald, William Phillips, and others, including George Orwell, who tried to get Serge's Memoirs published with Seeker and Warburg.¹²¹

The themes Serge wrote about were varied, expressing his analysis of the current situation, his new found interests in psychology and anthropology, and his concern for the possibility of genuine socialist struggles. These interests reflected the world situation, and the relationships Serge formed in Mexico, from his wife's passionate embrace of early Mexican culture, to his friendship with the German psychologist Herbert Lenhof, to the discussions in the continuing group of European revolutionary exiles.

The Mexican group Socialismo y Libertad wrote another book together, which was the product of their discussions on the nature of the present period. The book was written throughout 1942 and 1943, and published in January 1944 as Los Problemas

¹¹⁹These were the only extracts ever published in English, until 1980-81, when the Scottish journal of International Literature, Arts and Affairs, Cencrastus published another eleven extracts, translated by John Manson.

¹²⁰Bohemia, La Habana, Septiembre 7 de 1941, ano 33, Vol. 33, Num. 36, written by Gilberto Gonzalez y Contreras.

¹²¹Serge was so poor that he had only one copy of the Memoirs, which he was naturally reluctant to trust to the overseas post. Much of his correspondence with Orwell deals with how Serge could safely get his copy to Orwell. See George Orwell to Dwight MacDonal, London 4.4.45. Dwight Macdonald was similarly attempting to find an American publisher for the Memoirs. This did not happen until Oxford University Press published Peter Sedgwick's translation in 1963.

Del Socialismo En Nuestro Tiempo, by Serge, Gorkin, Pivert, and Paul Chevalier¹²². Serge's contribution was called "Guerra de Transformacion Social"¹²³ (War of Social Transformation) and it outlined Serge's position on the character of World War II, which he saw as fundamentally different from World War One. Serge's conception of the global conflict was that it was a war taking place in a transitional epoch, and would usher in new social formations which would be characterized by a tendency toward totalitarian collectivist command economies.

In Nazi Germany, Serge described the existence of a duality of power between the capitalist class and the Nazi bureaucracy. Citing Hilferding's 1910 work on the relationship between economic and political power and Franz Neumann's study of Nazi Germany as 'totalitarian monopoly capitalism' Serge wrote that he thought James Burnham's and Dwight Macdonald's newer and more expressive formulation of 'bureaucratic collectivism' better described this social formation. To emphasize his point, Serge quoted something Trotsky wrote in 1939, a year before his death:

"El regimen sovietico, el fascismo, el nazismo, el New Deal, tienen innegablemente rasgos comunes, determinados, en ultima instancia, por las tendencias colectivistas de la economia moderna... A consecuencia de la postracion de la clase obrera, esas tendencias revisten la forma del colectivismo burocratico..."¹²⁴

¹²²Los Problemas del Socialismo en Nuestro Tiempo, Ediciones Ibero Americanas, Mexico 1944.

¹²³Victor Serge, "Guerra de Transformacion Social" in Los Problemas del Socialismo en Nuestro Tiempo, pp. 11-41.

¹²⁴Victor Serge, "Guerra de Transformacion Social" in Los Problemas del Socialismo en Nuestro Tiempo, pp. 19-20. Translation: "The Soviet regime, fascism, Nazism, and the New Deal undeniably share common traits determined in the last instance by the collectivist tendencies of the modern economy... As the consequence of the exhaustion of the working class, these tendencies take on the form of bureaucratic collectivism..."

Serge wrote widely on this issue: the same ideas and even the same citations permeate his unpublished essays, his review articles and his diary entries, which will be summarized below.

The Mexican political group enlarged their contacts and continued their discussions of the character of the world throughout 1944. They tried to hammer out a new manifesto, which Serge thought both inappropriate and imperious. In his diary entry of 13 September 1944, Serge severely criticized the document, which he indicated was formulated by Marceau Pivert, Enrique Gironella and W.S. Serge tended to question every thesis put forward by these independent socialists, which he considered nothing but "old stock phrases."¹²⁵ His frustration was evident, as Serge was grappling with uncertainties while they were repeating old formulae.

The Trotskyists in their various organizations, following the Old Man's theoretical lead, had forecast that Stalin would not survive WWII, that the war would give way to a new revolutionary upsurge. In reality, Stalin defeated Hitler and at home embarked on a new enslavement of returning soldiers, and a vast, forced reconstruction program. In Western Europe, the revolutionary upsurge failed to materialize and radicals were successfully 'contained.' The new conjuncture did not conform to their preconceptions, nor to Trotsky's predictions. With Trotsky's death, the Trotskyists were bereft of his authoritative theoretical preeminence. As Serge had said, the Trotskyists found it difficult to think outside Trotsky's head, valiant though they might be as militants. Many activists of the prewar generation left politics after the war, discouraged by political differences, or failed realizations. The main issues tended to be the class nature of the USSR, and the role of the working class in the West.

¹²⁵ Serge, "Ideological Discussions," 13 Sept. 1944, Carnets, pp. 135-139.

The other left organizations, the anti-Stalinists Serge had wanted to group together in International Committees, suffered similarly. Serge's group in Mexico, Socialismo y Libertad, was not immune to the fate of other left groups, was internally divided, and isolated from real political struggles. In fact much of what Serge wrote about the Fourth International, discussed in the previous chapter, turned out to be equally true in the other non-Stalinist groups of the left, the syndicalists, libertarian socialists, left Mensheviks, and Trotskyoids. Political militants in the forties worked under extreme pressure, not simply because of the war, but because their predictions about the Soviet Union did not come to pass. Stalinism survived, and Nazism and Francoism inflicted horrible defeats on the working class. Working alone, Serge grappled with these questions in a creative political way.

II. 5.20 Stalinism, the emergence of the technocracy and "totalitarian collectivism."

Serge's writings in this last period revealed his fresh thinking, and active, agile mind. He went wrong, mistaking tendencies for trajectories, but nonetheless went farther than Trotsky had, without abandoning socialism as had so many whose 'god had failed' them. For those socialists who had not abandoned Marxism, Serge bemoaned that fact that they seemed to still see the world in traditional, if not routine terms, as if it were 1917 or even 1871.¹²⁶

Serge thought the struggle was no longer simply between capitalism or socialism, that new obstacles were produced by Stalinism, now a factor in the world. In response to reading an ILP bulletin¹²⁷ from England, Serge wrote in his diary that

¹²⁶Serge, "Socialist Problems," entry for 25 November 1944, Carnets, p. 168.

¹²⁷Independent Labour Party.

there are no longer two adversaries facing each other, that of revolution and reaction. Now there are three: conservatism, socialism and Stalinist totalitarianism, engaged in mortal struggle.¹²⁸ He continued, in a thought that is every bit as meaningful in the 1990s as in 1944: "I'm inclined to think that the fate of Europe will not be decided until Stalinist totalitarianism is restricted or destroyed by the new conflicts which of necessity it brings forth."¹²⁹

The existence of Stalinism colored all current struggles, exerting a negative influence, for example, on the colonial struggle, which Serge insisted could not be mistaken for socialist struggle, simply anti-imperialist and Stalinized. This was an unpopular view on the left, one which Laurette Sejourne made sure to point out to me.¹³⁰ She said Serge did not support the independence of India, nor did he support Ho Chi Minh. In Partisan Review, La Wallonie, and La Revolution proletarienne Serge wrote that the struggle for socialism still resided in Europe, that national liberation struggles would lead to an extension of Soviet totalitarianism, which was ultimately anti-socialist and anti-human.

Having said that, Serge wrote in a later diary entry that Hilferding saw better than Trotsky the present conflict from the point of view of the incredible power of the totalitarian state:

"This power is so great that the USSR is in a position to dominate, channel, crush the revolutionary movements of Western Europe, Asia and to a certain extent Latin America. She can nip in the bud the ones that would embarrass her and support, promote, arm effectively the others. LT's proposition [that the salvation of the Russian revolution would come from the revolutionary transformations in Western Europe, the contagiousness of which the totalitarian Russian

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid., p. 170.

¹³⁰ Interview with Laurette Sejourne, Sept. 6, 1990, Mexico City.

apparatus wouldn't be able to resist] could only come true if the Russian totalitarian state were to weaken, spent from inside by extraordinary efforts."¹³¹

In the same vein, Serge criticized Dwight Macdonald's ingenuousness in the American magazine Politics for seeing the possibility of reforming the Communist Parties.¹³² Serge thought that Macdonald lived in too free a country to understand! Serge wrote that the new type of leader that would emerge was the type of Mao and Tito, "cynical and convinced, who will be 'revolutionary' or counter-revolutionary -- or both at the same time -- according to the orders they receive and capable of a turn-about from one day to the next."¹³³ In fact, Serge wrote that when Mao Tse-Tung was in Moscow in 1926-27, he "sympathized deeply with the Opposition, but he ended up by adopting the cynically pragmatic formula: Who can give us arms and money?"¹³⁴

Yet while Serge was quite clear on the nature of the Communist Parties, he did not have a viable organizational strategy. In a conversation with Narciso Molins, Serge said the worst thing a genuine socialist left could do, would be to remain a tiny sect. Far better, wrote Serge, to enter the old Socialist parties, where democratic practices would allow the possibility of influence. Molins was skeptical of the "old opportunists" who "would calmly let us be murdered by the Stalinists..."¹³⁵ Serge acknowledged this, but had no other

¹³¹Carnets, p. 181.

¹³²"Stalinism and the Resistance -- A Letter from Victor Serge," Politics, Feb. 1945, pp. 61-62. In this letter Serge tried to alert the American left to the totalitarian nature of the Communist Parties, which would brook no dissidence.

¹³³Carnets, p. 171.

¹³⁴Serge, Politics, Feb. 1945, p. 62.

¹³⁵Carnets, p. 171.

prescription. Yet in 1947, Serge would write in Partisan Review that

"the old reformism is no less outmoded than insurrection. Socialist action is by definition, neither exceptionally timid nor exceptionally violent, but it seems that it has to be both transformer and liberator, or else disintegrate."¹³⁶

In this same article, Serge stressed that Stalinism and Social Democracy were inching toward each other, and that the blindness of the social democrats towards "this darkest of despotisms" was unforgivable ("they have not seen the Kazakhs die of famine"). In an evident clarity of purpose that Serge did not demonstrate in the above quoted conversation with Narciso Molins, Serge stated "if socialism ... does not proclaim itself as the party of human dignity, obviously it will only be crushed between the reactionaries and the totalitarians," this last even more cruel because of its "unimaginable inner weakness."¹³⁷ Now more than ever, Serge told his public in America through the journal Politics, we must reconstruct "a conscious and energetic socialist movement that will not allow itself to be manipulated by the CP."¹³⁸

The new levels of barbarity that Stalin demonstrated were outdone by Hitler with the extermination of the Jews. Serge was horrified by the Nazi inhumanity, and believed this made the character of the war more than simply an imperialist war, that the anti-semitism unleashed by the war brought to it a particular character. Serge wrote in his diary on 12 Nov. 1944 that this unspeakable horror, the annihilation of the Jews, with

¹³⁶Serge, "The Socialist Imperative," in Partisan Review discussion, "The Future of Socialism: V," Sept-Oct. 1947, Vol. XIV, No. 5, p. 515.

¹³⁷Serge, PR, Sept-Oct. 1947, p. 516.

¹³⁸Serge, Politics, (Feb. 1945), p. 62. This journal of politics and popular culture was edited by Dwight MacDonald after he left Partisan Review on his journey from Trotskyism to anarchism. The journal lasted from 1944-1949.

little fight even from Jews abroad was too difficult to comprehend. Serge declared "I am lost" when trying to understand -- the Nazis have reversed the trend of human evolution (proceeding from animality to humanism) and were now destroying the attainments of thousands of years of history. It is no wonder that in a conversation with an unnamed Polish socialist in December 1944, Serge agreed that "since dignity and hope alone remain to be saved, we are advocates of absolute uncompromisingness."¹³⁹

Serge's uncompromisingness, his intransigence and his commitment to socialist democracy was demonstrated in the numerous essays he left unpublished in Mexico. Contemplating the scenarios for the future and seeing hope for vast socialist movements in Europe to take advantage of Stalinist exhaustion, Serge wrote:

"Socialism has only been able to grow within bourgeois democracy (of which it was to a large extent the creator.) If by unawareness, lack of educated, energetic leaders, various corruptibilities, it is taken in tow by 'revolutionary' Stalinism (revolutionary, insofar as the planned economy still is in comparison with traditional capitalism -- and it's a slight extent, considering the evolution of the whole of capitalism towards planning -- control -- collectivisation), it abdicates and succumbs, inevitably crushed and disgraced. Its only chance of life and victory is in intransigence vis-a-vis Stalinist totalitarianism, by the upholding of beliefs in democracy and humanism (excluding controlled thought) and vis-a-vis capitalist conservatism, in the fight for the restoration of the traditional democratic liberties, become revolutionary."¹⁴⁰

This passage contains the germs of what preoccupied Serge for the short remainder of his life. He was able to detect the germ, to continue the metaphor, but not able to see what organism would grow from it. He also exhibited a mixture of

¹³⁹Serge, Carnets, 10 Dec. 1944, p. 177.

¹⁴⁰Ibid., p. 182.

confusion and clarity over the question of planning. The confusion was both semantic and substantial. The term he used most often was the 'economie dirigee' which I prefer to translate as the command economy, the directed or controlled economy, or what is sometimes called bureaucratic administration. Serge described the features of a bureaucratically administered command economy, but sometimes used it interchangeably with the phrase 'planned economy.' Serge did distinguish what he finally called "Stalinist planning" from the Marxist conception of planning,¹⁴¹ but in his discussion of totalitarian planning, which he saw in the controlled economy of fascism and the Western war plan, -- what Serge's generation often called 'war-time socialism' -- there is real confusion between the simple allocation of resources, even done by capitalist firms, and the Marxist conception of planning, which is the conscious regulation of the economy by the freely associated producers. Marxist planning, unlike administration or bourgeois planning, is not a technical, but a social relation.

In the end, Serge left hundreds of essays, all of which should be published. Without trying to examine them all, it can be said that his thoughts expressed throughout were broadly similar:¹⁴² the USSR was neither capitalist nor socialist,¹⁴³ operated out of fear of independent thought and was in permanent conflict with its own people, with a mighty totalitarian state machine directed against them, that the new world order was one which would change the social structure of the world. Again, Serge was particularly perceptive in noting the postwar

¹⁴¹Serge, unpublished typescript, no date, no title, Serge Archives, Mexico.

¹⁴²In fact, Serge was often repetitive, using the same examples, and the same phrases.

¹⁴³Serge, "Necesidad de una renovacion del Socialismo," Mundo, June 1945, p. 18.

nationalizations as accommodations to the actuality of the socialist revolution and its consequences, however degraded. Serge was able to see the collectivization, or perhaps the increasing socialization of production and thought it would give rise to new structures, but that the concentrated control of production carried with it the danger of totalitarianism. At the same time, Serge noted that the poverty of traditional socialism coincided with the immense revolutionary crisis of the modern world that forcefully puts socialism on the order of the day.¹⁴⁴

Thus Serge's thinking about the character of the world during and immediately after the war is intimately connected to his analysis of the character of Stalinism. In an essay "L'URSS A-T-Elle Un Regime Socialiste?"¹⁴⁵ Serge stated that few socialist theorists had the time to develop their theoretical glimpses into the future, and were "unable to see beyond the limited horizons of the concrete present," and the glimpses were never developed or integrated into the living philosophy of the socialist movement.

In this essay Serge came very close to adopting a bureaucratic collectivist analysis of the USSR, a 'third solution' which was neither capitalist nor socialist but was defined by "bureaucratic planning based on the obliteration, degradation or abolition of private property." Serge was influenced by Franz Neumann's Behemoth,¹⁴⁶ which defined the social structure of Nazi Germany, and was struck its similarities with Stalinism. Other writers as well, such as James Burnham, Dwight Macdonald and Sidney Hook, reached the

¹⁴⁴Serge, "Necesidad de una renovacion del Socialismo," Mundo, Libertad y Socialismo, Mexico, June 1945 (but written in April 1943.)

¹⁴⁵Dated 1946, Serge archive, Mexico. Published in Masses, Paris, 1947.

¹⁴⁶Neumann, Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism 1933-1944, Oxford University Press, 1942, 1944.

conclusion that the totalitarian states bore great resemblance. Trotsky, following Marx, also wrote (in Aug. 1939) of the collectivist tendencies of the modern economy.

Serge took the intuitive glimpse of Trotsky further, and showed how although Nazism was based on capital and supported by capital, the source of privileges in Nazi society depended more on cooperation in the political regime than ownership of the means of production or wealth.¹⁴⁷ Serge wrote this essay at the end of the war, and thus did not see the short lived character of the Nazi regime, which served its purpose of crushing the working class so that capital could go its way unmolested by the threat of socialism. Nonetheless Serge was struggling here to define the future, which he thought, based on the tendencies of the modern economy, would lead to a limitation of laissez-faire through controls that would in practice abolish the free market. The new economic collectivism that he had thought synonymous with socialism as a youth now represented a new and terrible form of exploitation. This collectivism had none of the goals of socialism, of "the realization of a rational economy and the liberation of mankind, the realization of a human destiny that achieves a new dignity,"¹⁴⁸ but this collectivism actually worsened the human condition and was, therefore, anti-socialist.

Serge then examined the Soviet Union in light of this new world form. While recognizing new distinct social categories in the USSR, Serge did not want to enter into the discussion of whether they should be called "classes, castes, social layers or

¹⁴⁷Serge, "L'URSS A-T-Elle Un Regime Socialiste?" 6 pp., Mexico 1946, Serge Archive, Mexico, p. 2. In fact, Serge went way out on a limb in July 1943, in a letter sent to the editor of Mundo, rhetorically titled "Es Capitalista la Economia Nazi?" a question he danced around without directly answering. Serge to Camarade directeur de Mundo, July 1943, Serge Archive, Mexico.

¹⁴⁸Ibid., p. 3.

something else."¹⁴⁹ This distinguishes him from both orthodox Trotskyist analysis, and the new class analysts of the state capitalist or bureaucratic collectivist tendencies. Serge examined instead, what he called the 'facts' of Soviet social structure, in which as much as 15% of the population comprised a penal workforce, enslaved and superexploited, and constantly renewed, (the "special reserve of labor"), 7% of the Soviet social hierarchy corresponded to the privileged layers, and the remaining 78% were exploited, impoverished workers.¹⁵⁰

Soviet totalitarianism, according to Serge, was established in 1936-38 through a bloody counterrevolution. The experience of Stalinism proved that the abolition of private property, collectivization and 'planning' could lead to a powerful, terrorist economic machinery and the most inhumane anti-socialism. In an unpublished fragment Serge left behind in Mexico, he characterized the USSR as a 'bureaucratic totalitarian state' and reaffirming the program of the Left Opposition, Serge insisted that had 'democratic planning' as opposed to 'Stalinist planning' been in place, industrialization would have "been slower but less exhausting and more fertile."¹⁵¹

While "L'Urss A-T-Elle Un Regime Socialiste?" shows extraordinary insight, it attempts a theorization of the new social structures without a political economy. The similarities between Stalinism and Nazism were striking, but so were the differences: Stalinism abolished the market, Nazism was a politically controlled market capitalist society, short-lived and with the purpose of defeating the challenge of the working class.

¹⁴⁹Ibid.

¹⁵⁰Ibid., p. 4.

¹⁵¹Serge, Unpublished typescript, no date, no title, Serge archives, Mexico. (This fragment appears to have been written just after the war.)

In a longer unpublished essay, "Economie Dirigee et Democratie"¹⁵² Serge again characterized the Soviet totalitarian state as one under siege, with a directed (or command) economy, rationing, state control over labor, a monopoly of power, thought control, and terror. Serge traced the administration of the economy to the "war time socialism" introduced in the capitalist economies during WWI, refined in the Soviet state with a one-party system, which Serge wrote, was no longer a political party, but a bureaucratic-military apparatus.¹⁵³ While in the Soviet case the aim was socialism and the fascist one anti-socialist, Serge wrote they both accomplished "collectivization and planification of production within a national framework... which is autarchic."¹⁵⁴

Unlike the earlier essay mentioned above, Serge does not here miss the essential difference between Stalinism and Nazism, which in the former rested on the annihilation of the old privileged classes, the collectivization of production and a new governing class of 'parvenus' from the working class, that rules in contradiction with itself because it must preserve the psychological tradition of socialism. In the case of the Nazis, the role of capital is central in creating and supporting the regime and results in an ongoing duality of power between the trusts and the party bureaucracy. This makes the Nazi regime less homogeneous, according to Serge.

Serge thought that the social transformations of Europe in the coming postwar world would include federations like the United States rather than traditional 19th century nation states; that the reconstruction would require planification continent-wide. Serge's ideas of the new Europe, which would be

¹⁵²Serge, "Economie dirigee et Democratie," 36 pp (single-spaced), no date, unpublished, Serge archive, Mexico.

¹⁵³Serge, "Economie Dirigee..." p. 4.

¹⁵⁴Ibid.

totalitarian and fascistic are fairly far from the mark: he wrote that paper money would disappear both in reality and as a symbol, class struggle would still be determinant, but with a new factor, that of the state with its organized and planned monopoly capital, capable of response. He saw this new society as anti-democratic and neo-fascistic. Again Serge was wrong, but with more than a measure of insight in his vision: postwar social democratic regimes used nationalizations to strengthen capitalist rule, while the new Europe of 1992 at least posits a U.S. type economic federation.

As for the USSR, Serge described its continued anti-socialist course, without even conceding a minimum of democratic reform. Brute force and the "complete absence of ideology ... translates simply as fear of thought and ideas."¹⁵⁵ Under these conditions, Serge wrote that neither Soviets nor Bolsheviks nor Bolshevik Parties could reemerge. He continued:

"The Soviet experience shows us [in the implementation of the five year plans] what horrible waste, what involuntary sabotage and what unnamed sufferings the totalitarian regime imposed on the people in their own name."¹⁵⁶

What Serge turned to here and in three other unpublished essays was the increased importance and thus privilege of the administrators and functionaries and technicians in the controlled economies. Examining the nature of 'collectivisation planifiee' Serge worried that the creation of a technocracy that runs the planning commissions will become the real governing power and replace the state. The problem for the working class would then become how to control the technocrats. Serge is here the precursor of the kind of thinking exemplified by the East Europeans Georgy Konrad and Ivan Szelenyi, who identified the class power of the intelligentsia, whose teleological knowledge

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 12n.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 15.

of production put them in a position of power in Soviet-type societies.¹⁵⁷

Serge wrote that this form of economic organization created a passive obedience, horror of initiative and responsibility, individual massive resistance, involuntary sabotage, and enormous waste. The directed economy substitutes a minimum of economic liberty for the economic liberty of insecurity, but freedom from unemployment is not a real liberation unless accompanied by freedom of opinion. "If instead of fearing unemployment and hunger one has now to fear repression for one's thoughts, then a new captivity has emerged, maybe heavier and more regressive than the old."¹⁵⁸

Serge wrote in an earlier article published in Partisan Review called "What is Fascism" that he found broad agreement with James Burnham on the role of the managers,¹⁵⁹ that

"The next European revolution will be fought on the terrain of planned economy -- no longer for or against strangled capitalism ... but over the question of management -- for whom? To whose benefit? ... The category of managers will tend to crystallize into a class and to monopolize power."¹⁶⁰

Thus, Serge thought that Burnham's theory was not incompatible with Marxism and

"Capitalist economy is going under, yielding to new types of transitional planned economies: capitalism is so hopeless that we see the counter-revolutions it incited now forced to strangle their begetter, as in

¹⁵⁷See Konrad and Szelenyi, 1974, The Intelligentsia on the Road to Class Power.

¹⁵⁸Serge, "Economie Dirigee" pp. 21-22.

¹⁵⁹Though the first pages of this essay are a sustained attack on Burnham's abandonment of the Marxist method, his vulgar Marxism, and his facile equation of Bolshevism and Stalinism. His critique of Burnham's politics continued in another unpublished essay in the Mexico Archives called "Lenin's Heir?" and in a letter to Sidney Hook in 1943.

¹⁶⁰Victor Serge, "What Is Fascism?" Partisan Review, Vol. VIII, No. 5, Sept-Oct. 1941, p. 420.

Germany and Italy and tomorrow elsewhere perhaps under other forms. But this does not do away with the problem of socialism. It remains in the very heart of the planned economies, because of the clash of interests (material and immaterial) between the rulers and the masses. Nor should we neglect the factors of psychology and tradition. From this standpoint, the struggle bears quite different aspects, according to whether the new managerial class is the product of an anti-working class and anti-Marxist counterrevolution, respectful (in theory) of private property, wedded to the principles of authority and hierarchy, as is the case in Germany and Italy -- or whether it is a class of usurpers who still invoke an ideology and tradition conflicting with its usurpation and standing for the democracy of work and the complete liberation of man. I emphasize this in order to emphasize that even from the viewpoint of the 'managerial revolution' deep antagonisms exist between Nazism and Stalinism. In every case, finally, when confronted with a planned economy, we should pose the question: 'Planned by whom? Planned for whom; Planned for what end? It is on this front that socialists will fight in the future, side by side with the masses.'¹⁶¹

Though Serge was sometimes ambiguous in his use of the term 'planned economy,' the above passage makes it clear that he did not consider it genuine (Marxist) planning, but for want of a better word, often settled on 'planning.' Yet the question he asked, "planning for whom, by whom?" demonstrated that for Serge the essential issue was that of democratic self organization versus totalitarian control.

As for the role of the technocrats or managers, Serge was not the first to draw attention to the growth of this group. He noticed that this stratum ran across social formations and concluded, at least partially, that there was a form of convergence, or that one social formation would result. This did not turn out to be the case. Both Burnham and Serge perceived that the world was in transition from capitalism and that the transition had transitional forms. Serge also pointed out the

¹⁶¹Ibid., pp. 420-421.

role that the first socialist revolution played in influencing this transition.

Serge's observation that managers gradually play a greater role in capitalist production was also picked up by Marx, who spoke of "the joint stock firm making the capitalist otiose."¹⁶² Serge went too far, however, as the managers have not taken over capitalism, nor have they usurped power in the USSR. The assumption of control to whatever degree by the bureaucracy in the USSR is not the same thing as occurs in capitalism or in Nazi Germany. Serge was suggesting that the managers would expropriate power from the capitalists and in the USSR, would act as controllers. In the USSR, however, the technocrats or administrators have not usurped capitalists, but rather cannot become capitalists because of the resistance of the working class, in whose name they rule, and hence must instead be the administrators of production. If they were to become 'genuine capitalists' they would not need to hide their 'illegitimate' privileges.

Serge saw that the first socialist revolution influenced the modern development of the world, both capitalist and non-capitalist. In the absence of workers democracy in the Soviet Union, administrators take the deliberate decisions that direct the economy, while in the advanced capitalist world the administrator-managers also increase their controlling role in production. If one looks at the immediate postwar world as the beginning of a standoff between capitalism and socialism, that is between capitalists and workers, a lacuna leading somewhere as yet undetermined -- then Serge's essays from this period appear all the more farsighted, even though he could not see how it would end. Rather than seeing the increasing role of managers and controllers of production as a product of the failure of

¹⁶²Thanks to Hillel Ticktin for this observation, HHT to SW, 12 May 1990.

socialism, he saw these managerial forms as steps on a necessary ladder.

While Serge could note the tendencies, his analysis was perhaps too sociological, without enough political economy. The world was not going collectivist, fascism remained capitalist though in a desperate form, and postwar capitalism remained capitalism, though it also adopted new forms.¹⁶³ The managers have proved to be more pro-capitalist than collectivist, even though they assume a more important role in production than before. In the Soviet Union they play a dominant role, for a different reason: in capitalism it is the influence of socialism, while in the Soviet Union, it is because of the aborted revolution, or the failure of socialism. Serge died just as the Cold War was beginning, and so was not able to see the actual contours of the postwar world.

Nonetheless, as in so much of Serge's work, there is a fundamentally correct perception which is very suggestive, without being sufficiently penetrative. These insights also show Serge to be miles ahead of his cohorts, a thinker of the present time grappling with real problems instead of old postulates.¹⁶⁴

Serge was certain socialism would ultimately win, and that it would come first to Europe, because Stalinism was inherently a weak system, even though he considered it more powerful and more dangerous than capitalism. Stalinism became more and more

¹⁶³Serge, on the other hand, wrote the editors of PR that it was wrong to call fascism a 'new order' since there was "nothing new in despotism... Nazism brings an order new only in relation to capitalism, made up of old things that we hate, a really phenomenal retrogression, war being the oldest thing in the world." PR, Sept-Oct. 1941, p. 422.

¹⁶⁴In this sense Serge went farther than Trotsky, who was clearly capable and should have begun to consider these problems, but was still too wedded to defending the nationalized property forms in the Soviet Union to actually analyze the content of these property forms.

dangerous because of its weakness and, Serge wrote, because of the resistance of the working class, which would ultimately have the last word.

In an undated and unpublished essay from Mexico, Serge explored the lacuna mentioned above, in which the class struggle continues amidst a decomposing capitalism -- because of the influence of the Russian revolution, -- all the while making an enormous effort to break the resistance of the working class. This essay repeats many of the tendencies Serge discussed elsewhere, but succinctly. He saw the defeats of the working class in Germany and Spain as a sign of the decline of the working class, because of Stalinism and unemployment due to the rationalization of production. Serge wrote that the war was ultimately between totalitarian collectivism and the possibility of historically conscious collectivism. If the former wins then it's the end of socialism for a whole era, -- but Serge did not think it would win.¹⁶⁵

In this unpublished essay Serge again wrote of the tendency in modern capitalism toward a planned collectivization which marked the end of 'liberal' free-market capitalism. The collectivization of production would come into conflict with the privileges of the owning minorities, and would give rise to new privileged minorities -- the administrators and technicians -- who the big capitalists would seek to integrate. In the new collectivism, the planning commissions would wield enormous power, like the old capitalist/financial oligarchies of earlier capitalism. There would also be enormous tension in the 'directed economy' between the privileged minorities who would resort to totalitarian methods to repress the masses, and the need for freedom for scientific investigation -- essential for technical progress, -- and efficient functioning factories

¹⁶⁵This is a loose summary of Serge's unpublished typescript, no date, no title, 2 pp., found in the Mexico archive. Many of the same points were raised in Serge's letter to Dwight MacDonald of 10 Sept 1943.

needing freedom of criticism for the workers, and freedom of initiative. Thus Serge saw industrial democracy as indispensable to the collectivization of production. Finally, Serge asserted that the class struggle will continue and socialism will be the natural and perfect culmination of these collectivist societies.

These last essays written from Serge's lonely Mexican exile show how much the Soviet Union continued to occupy center stage in Serge's thinking, and how deeply affected he was by the turbulent events in Europe before and during the World War. His essays were often perceptive but insufficiently rigorous, sometimes demonstrating more impressionistic conjecture than a thoroughgoing political economy. He was haunted by the twin fears of the spread of totalitarian collectivism and the possibility of a new war, which he thought Stalin was preparing, and worried that Stalin might use nuclear weapons. This preoccupation weighed heavily upon Serge who thought the Soviet Union was inherently unstable and weak, with Stalin ruling through brute force alone. He came to believe that change had to come from within, but this was near impossible to accomplish.

In 1945 Serge wrote an article in English, which stated that the democratic aspirations of the Soviet workers must be encouraged from the outside. He even laid out a program for the 'Great Soviet reform' which he saw as the only guarantee against a new war. This article is uncharacteristic for Serge, because it is both vague and contradictory, positing a democracy that could be confused with bourgeois democracy.¹⁶⁶ Serge was troubled by his vision of totalitarian collectivisms strangling human rights on a world scale and understood that only class struggle and mass action could counteract this perspective, the very actions most difficult to undertake in a totalitarian society. Like so much of Serge's work, this essay suffers from

¹⁶⁶ Unpublished Mss, "On the Russian Problem" 1945, 8pp, Serge Archives, Mexico.

impressionistic speculation even though it is aiming in the right direction.

Serge struggled with these questions as a Marxist with the experience of Stalinism foremost in his mind, and having just gone through fascism. The mature Serge was no less Marxist for going beyond the orthodoxies, nor had he reverted to anarchism, moralism, centrism or Menshevism. He was constantly developing, incorporating new ideas: in 1943, he wrote to Dwight Macdonald that modern psychology must be integrated with Marxism, which would be enriched by this body of knowledge. After all, he told Macdonald, "Man is a conscious animal!"¹⁶⁷ In May 1947, Serge published an article "Socialism and Psychology"¹⁶⁸ in which he argued forcefully that "to meet the exigencies of our day, socialism must enrich itself with the newly-acquired knowledge of the motivating factors determining human conduct."¹⁶⁹

Serge, then, was engaged in a renewal of Marxist thought, in which no shibboleth was too sacred to leave unscrutinized. Even the revolution of 1917, which Serge defended just as he defended its early years, the time of Lenin, was worthy of new reflection. Serge wrote that 30 years later one couldn't expect 1917 to repeat itself in a transformed global situation with new actors on the scene. There was still much to learn from the experience of the first proletarian revolution, but surely one essential lesson was that new revolutions must be "socialist -- in the humanist sense of the word -- and more precisely, socializing, through democratic, libertarian means."¹⁷⁰ Another important lesson regarded organization, which Serge recognized

¹⁶⁷Serge to MacDonald, Mexico, Sept. 7, 1943. (MacDonald Papers, Yale University Library).

¹⁶⁸Serge, "Socialism and Psychology," in Modern Review, vol. 1, No. 3, May 1947, pp. 194-202.

¹⁶⁹Ibid., p. 195.

¹⁷⁰Serge, "Trente Ans Apres La Revolution Russe," p. 32.

as necessary, though he cautioned against "centralization, discipline, [and] guided ideology."

Finally, Serge, ever the optimist in spite of the darkness, reminded his readers that even though the first socialist revolution led to the "concentration camp universe" of Stalinism, its "high degree of development attained by state-controlled production" along with the advent of capitalist nationalizations in Europe would again create imperatives that would "combine with the desire for social justice and a new found freedom to once again place the economy at the service of the community."¹⁷¹

Serge drew on the essential humanism of Marxism and its scientific spirit of open inquiry, while attacking those like Sidney Hook¹⁷² and James Burnham, who separated the class struggle from socialism, and saw Stalinism as the same as Bolshevism, Stalinist planning as Marxist planning. Serge was full of hope for the future, despite living through terrible defeats, and persecution so severe that he acknowledged that "critical intelligence" itself was dangerous¹⁷³ to survival. Foreseeing totalitarian collectivist societies that were fundamentally anti-democratic and anti-socialist, Serge affirmed that the citizens of these states would "soon demand control over the elaboration and application of plans, choosing of managers and leaders, and the liberties which this control requires."¹⁷⁴

II. 5.21 Conclusion

¹⁷¹Serge, "TAALRR," pp. 33-34.

¹⁷²Serge to Sidney Hook, "Marxism et Democratie," July 10, 1943.

¹⁷³Serge, Memoirs, p. 376.

¹⁷⁴Typescript, no title, no date, Serge Archives, 2 pp.

Victor Serge's political trajectory, his writings and his life experience were unique in the revolutionary movement. His revolutionary integrity and dedication to humanity were not negotiable, were in fact beyond compromise. In an obituary for Serge that appeared in the January 1948 edition of Modern Review, the editors proclaimed "his chef d'oeuvre was his own life."¹⁷⁵ In a New Left Review article, Nicholas Krasso wrote that Serge's life was most remarkable as a "corrective" to Stalinism.¹⁷⁶ Serge was an intransigent socialist who believed at the same time that intransigence was necessary and dangerous: he was a Leninist whose support of the Russian revolution and its ideals was unwavering, and who, while contributing to Menshevik journals, nonetheless took them to task for identifying Leninism with Stalinism: and at the same time, Serge criticized certain of Lenin's practices for leaving the door open for a Stalin. Serge was a Trotskyist who was spurned by the Trotskyists, who called him a centrist for his nonconformist views. Serge differed from the Trotskyists because he held that the revolution began to degenerate with the establishment of the Cheka and the death penalty, and slid down the road to Totalitarianism as early as 1921, with Kronstadt and NEP. He even dared to suggest that the Marxist project, as interpreted by too many "Marxists" was totalitarian,¹⁷⁷ though the aspiration and struggle for social justice was profoundly democratic.

Serge angered all his political associates by publishing wherever he could: Trotsky was enraged to see his articles in La Revolution proletarienne, which he considered a journal of

¹⁷⁵ "In Memorium: Victor Serge," Modern Review Vol II, No. 1, January 1948, pp. 6-7.

¹⁷⁶ Nicholas Krasso, "Revolutionary Romanticism," New Left Review, No. 21, Sept-Oct. 1963, pp. 107-111.

¹⁷⁷ "A Definition of Socialism," Unpublished manuscript, no date, Serge Archive, Mexico.

'petty bourgeois syndicalists' and Dwight Macdonald and others worried about Serge's association with the Menshevik New Leader in New York. In the former case Serge disagreed with Trotsky and published with the sole aim of gaining as wide an audience as he could, and with the latter, Serge was also trying to make a living and hence published where he could, with pay. Macdonald, who befriended and supported and published Serge, worried that Serge was becoming a professional anti-Stalinist like the others around the New Leader, such as Max Eastman, and Sidney Hook. Alan Wald reiterates this point in his article "Victor Serge and the New York Anti-Stalinist Left, 1937-47"¹⁷⁸, where he is certain that Serge was on the same path as these ex-Marxists.

Serge confounded his comrades by his associations, but this had always been true, from the earliest days when he associated in the USSR with the theosophists, the Bolsheviks and the anarchists, in France with the revolutionary syndicalists and French socialists and Trotskyists, with the POUM in Spain and the Fourth Internationalists in Belgium and France. It was no different in Mexico, where Serge took up with psychologists, revolutionists, syndicalists and social democrats. Serge was in sum, always a maverick. He was universally denounced and maligned, by the right (as a unrepentant Marxist revolutionary) by the Stalinists (who called him a fascist-Trotskyite Fifth Columnist) by the Trotskyists (who called him a centrist or a petty-bourgeois intellectual moralist). The Social Democrats considered him an ex-Marxist, and the various anti-Stalinists in the left, when they weren't attacking him, were claiming him as their own.

Throughout this study we have tried to show where Serge stood, and what his ideas were in relation to the course of Soviet historical and political development. It is because his writings are so varied in his final years, and so suggestive --

¹⁷⁸Forthcoming, in a special issue of Critique devoted to Victor Serge.

often taking ambiguous directions -- that he could easily be claimed or disowned by any of the anti-Stalinist tendencies. What distinguishes his writing, apart from its poetic expressiveness, is that it is rich, varied and questioning.

Even in defeat, Serge sought to reaffirm his Marxism, noting that we socialists

"should not be too discouraged if we see clearly why and how we have been beaten. After all, we are used to it, we know that we must be the defeated for a long time in order no longer to be so one day. And we have, in spite of everything, enough victories behind us to keep us going, provided we don't renounce the compass Marx has left to us."¹⁷⁹

Serge was unable to satisfactorily resolve the lives of his characters in The Long Dusk¹⁸⁰ and so considered the work inferior. I think rather that history offered no resolution, but this novel, like Serge's work in general was one of great insight and evocation, and also of hope, not naive hope, but of a far more profound hope based on a deep understanding of human history and social processes, and this hope that Serge's work expresses was a victory in itself.

Serge's ideas consigned him to a life of poverty and obscurity: his rejection of both the Soviet state and the capitalist West assured his marginality. He paid dearly: he has been ignored or poorly understood, his books have disappeared, been confiscated, or remain unpublished even though they establish him as a man of the contemporary world, whose ideas are increasingly relevant.

Victor Serge is more than an historical figure, whose writings are a neglected addition to a chapter of the twentieth century. Although his role in shaping events was not as decisive as that played by revolutionary leaders whose theories and

¹⁷⁹Serge, "What is Fascism?" PR, Vol. VII, No. 5, Sept-Oct. 1941.

¹⁸⁰Diary entry for 4 December 1944, "On the Ending of the Novel," Carnets, p. 173.

actions made them towering figures, Serge's perception and description of these events casts a light on the actions and ideas of both leaders and masses which not only illuminates the past but reflects on today's world as well. The aim of this study is to let more people see that brilliant light.

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 Eulalia Guzman (1)
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- Isabel Diaz, Jan. 1986, May 1987, Aug. 1990, Mexico City.
- Irina Gogua, March 10, 1989, Moscow.
- Mary Jayne Gold (conducted by John Eden), France, July 1989.
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III. Intelligence Files on Victor Serge

Some 175 pages of intelligence reports on Victor Serge released to the author through a Freedom of Information Act request. The file contains Intelligence Reports from agents in Chile, Colombia, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Peru, and the 'Fifteenth Naval District, in Washington, New York, and San Francisco. Several branches of intelligence seemed to have been involved in gathering information on Serge. Files released in 1987-1989 inter alia include:

1. Letter from Dept of State, Visa Services, 9.25.89
2. Diplomatic Security Service of Dept of State, 4.10.89; declassified document 65-54550-16, reporting agent Walter S. Pedigo, investigating in Mexico City from April to May 1954 [listing Serge --dead 7 years--as a famous painter living in Mexico]
3. 24 May 1988, from Defense Intelligence Agency, reporting investigation in Mexico City of 26 March 1946.
4. Doct #100-236386-3, from HQ Southern Defense Command, Fort Sam Houston, 1 Feb 44. Includes subversive annex on magazine Politics 'a trotskyite organ' mentioning Serge's Mexican group, dated 6-13 Dec. 1946.

5. From the same again, 4 Feb. 1944, names and addresses of Serge and all his associates in Mexico with short bios, plus information on Dwight MacDonald
6. From Dept of Army, US Army Intelligence and Security Command, 4.16.88;
7. June 4, 1987, from Defense Intelligence Agency;
8. 10 June 1987, from US Dept of Justice
9. April 29, 1987, from Dept of Navy, Naval Intelligence Command, declassified documents Op-16-f-7, A8-5/QQ/EJ3, Serial No. 0871716, covering reports from August and Sept 1941.
10. Apr 22, 1987, from US Army Intelligence and Security Command; April 24, 1987 from FBI
11. Mar 2, 1987, from Office of Legal Policy, FBI
12. 6 Jan 1987, from Dept of Justice, FBI
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