

The Serge-Trotsky Papers

Edited and introduced
by David Cotterill

Correspondence and Other Writings between Victor Serge and Leon Trotsky

Leon Trotsky



Victor Serge



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D.J. Cotterill

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Dedication

This book was originally devised in the late 1970s as part of a collaboration between Peter Sedgwick and Richard Greeman to get as many of Serge's titles into print as possible. The Serge–Trotsky correspondence thus became part of Peter's contribution to this endeavour. Sadly, however, Peter died during his preparation for the work and the project then lay dormant for several years until revived by the Serge centenary, when I became its editor. Whilst, for obvious reasons, this book is substantially different from any of Peter's projected versions, it draws extensively on the work Peter did, using his translations of Serge's material whenever possible, especially in the notes to the correspondence, which have been included with very few changes and are a work of great scholarship.

To my great regret I neither met nor corresponded with Peter Sedgwick and therefore turned to his friend Dr David Widgery to write an appreciation of Peter's contribution to intellectual life, Serge studies and indeed to this volume. As many readers will know, David himself died in late 1992 during the final preparations for this work and before he could complete his appreciation of Peter.

Maria Enzenberger, who translated for Peter the Russian language Serge–Trotsky letters included here, sadly also died before this volume could be published.

The achievements of Peter Sedgwick, David Widgery and Maria Enzenberger in their respective fields and in life need no further comment from me – they are there for all to see. This volume is therefore humbly dedicated to their memory.

Preface

It is common for writers to accumulate debts of obligation to others during the period of work on their volume, as no book is entirely the sole work of one person, however lonely the writing of it is. Happily this work is no exception to the rule, and this editor would like to thank all equally for their help and advice in its preparation. First, I should like to thank the Serge estate and Vlady Kibalchich for permission to use Serge's material. I should also like to thank Mrs M. Sedgwick for permission to use the translations made by her late husband, Peter Sedgwick. I am grateful, too, to Roger van Zwanenberg at Pluto Press for taking up this project along with other Serge publications, and for his belief generally in the quality of Serge's work. Similarly I wish to thank the staff at Pluto for their patience during the seemingly endless gestation period of this project – I do hope they can forgive me.

No work on Victor Serge, however large or small, can ignore the contribution of Richard Greeman, whose work over the years has borne the mark of true scholarship, in his writings on Serge and in his translations of Serge's novels. They are a genuine source of inspiration for others as well as myself and I have shamelessly plundered them here in the hope of a better understanding. A special thanks should go to my co-contributors – to Philip Spencer for his insightful introductions to Chapter 1 on Serge's early Bolshevism and to Chapter 5 on Serge's character as an Oppositionist, and also to Susan Weissman for her knowledgeable introduction to Chapter 4, taking us through the intricacies of Serge's relations with the Fourth International. Thanks are due too to George Paizis and Ian Birchall for help with translations from French into English – their individual contributions are credited within the references. I should further like to thank Ian Birchall for his kindness and patience in answering my many enquiries, for reading the drafts of the book in preparation and his many suggestions. Needless to say all the above are absolved completely of responsibility for any of the book's faults, which are all mine.

I would also like to take the opportunity to thank all the members of the Serge Centenary Group, especially Bill Marshall for so much help

on Serge in the past, John Eden, Bryony Dixon and Richard Parry and all who made the celebration of Victor Serge's centenary such a rewarding experience. Finally I would like to thank my wife and partner Gill Furlong, without whom so little could be achieved, not just for her help on the notes and bibliography, but also for her unfailing support.

Acknowledgements

In Chapter 1, the following extracts were first published in *La Vie ouvrière*: 'Petrograd' (from 'La Ville en danger'), 'The Tragic Face of Revolution', and 'The Problems of Dictatorship'. The letter to Michel Kneller, a copy of which is in the Musée Sociale, Paris, is published here for the first time.

In Chapter 3, two pieces are taken from *La Révolution prolétarienne*: 'Crimes in Russia, Intrigues in Spain' and 'A Goodbye to Andreu Nin', and one from *Les Humbles* ('Notes on the Spanish Drama'). Two originally appeared in Spanish in *La Batalla* – 'Una Carta del Gran Revolucionario Ruso Victor Serge', and the letter to the Executive Committee of the POUM. Three extracts by Leon Trotsky are from *The Spanish Revolution (1931–9)*.

In Chapter 4, *The New International* originally published five of the documents: 'The Hue and Cry over Kronstadt', 'Once More: Kronstadt', 'More on the Suppression of Kronstadt', 'Reply to Trotsky' (from 'A Letter and Some Notes'), and 'The Masses Have Nothing to Do with It!' (from 'The Moralists and Sycophants against Marxism'). The letter to Wendelin Thomas and the piece entitled 'Intellectual ex-Radicals and World Reaction' first appeared in *Socialist Appeal*; 'Fiction and Fact. Kronstadt' and 'Ideas and Facts; Kronstadt 1921 – Against the Sectarian Spirit – Bolshevism and Anarchism' were originally published in *La Révolution prolétarienne*; 'Victor Serge and the Fourth International' is taken from *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1938–1939* and 'My Break with Trotsky' from the *Carnets*. The 'Letter to Angelica Balabanova' in the Serge Archive in Mexico is here published for the first time. 'Marxism in Our Time' appeared in *Partisan Review*.

Also from *Partisan Review* is the piece 'In Memory: LD Trotsky' in Chapter 5. The 'Obituary. Leon Sedov' was first published in *La Révolution prolétarienne*. The previously unpublished 'On Trotskyism' is in the Serge Archive, Mexico. The extracts entitled 'The Old Man – The Fourth International' and 'The Life of the Oppositionists' come from *From Lenin to Stalin* and *Destiny of a Revolution* respectively. Finally, entries for 1944 are extracted from the *Carnets*.

Glossary of Organisations

BOC Bloque Obrero y Campesino (Workers and Peasants Bloc). Spanish left centrist organisation based in Catalonia. Forerunner of the POUM. Previously known as the Catalan Federation.

CGT Confédération Générale du Travail (General Confederation of Labour). The major trade union formation in France.

CGTU Confédération Générale du Travail Unitaire (Unitary General Confederation of Labour). Formerly the left wing of the CGT, dominated by the Communist Party; became a separate organisation in 1921 and was reunited with the CGT in 1936.

CHEKA Special Commission of the Soviet Union for counter-revolutionary activity.

CNT Confederación Nacional del Trabajo (National Confederation of Labour). The anarcho-syndicalist trade union federation in Spain.

CPSU Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

FAI Federación Anarquista Ibérica (Iberian Anarchist Federation). Political wing of the CNT.

GPU The Soviet security police, absorbed into the NKVD in 1939.

IS The International Secretariat of the Fourth International.

KPD Kommunistische Partei Deutschland (German Communist Party).

NKVD Narodnyi Komissariat Vnutrennykh Del (People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs).

OVRA Italian Secret Service.

PCE Partido Comunista de España. The Communist Party of Spain.

PCF Parti Communiste Français (French Communist Party).

POB Parti Ouvrier Belge (Belgian Workers Party). The main social democratic party in Belgium.

POI Parti Ouvrier Internationaliste (International Workers Party). The French Section of the Trotskyist movement, formed by a merger between two groups in June 1936.

POUM Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista (Workers Party of Marxist Unity). Formed in 1935 by a fusion of the Workers and Peasants Bloc (BOC) with the former members of the Spanish Left Opposition led by André Nin.

PSOP Parti Socialiste Ouvrier et Paysan (Workers and Peasants Socialist Party). French centrist party formed by the 'revolutionary left' under Marceau Pivert of the Socialist Party in June 1938.

PSR Parti Socialiste Révolutionnaire (Socialist Revolutionary Party). The Belgian Section of the Fourth International.

PSUC Partido Socialista Unificado de Catalunya (Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia).

RILU Red International of Labour Unions.

RP *La Révolution Proletarienne*. 'The Proletarian Revolution', revolutionary-syndicalist newspaper founded in 1925.

RSAP Socialist Workers Party of Holland.

SAP Sozialistischer Arbeiter Partei (German Socialist Workers Party). Formed from a split in German Social Democracy in 1931. Joined with the International Left Opposition in 1993 in calling for a new International but moved rapidly to the right, endorsing a People's Front in Germany.

SFIO Section Française Internationale (French section of the Workers [Second] International). The official name of the French Socialist Party. In 1920 a majority of the SFIO left to form the French Communist Party; the reformist minority retained the name.

SPD German Socialist Party.

UGT Union General de Trabajadores (General Union of Workers). Spanish reformist trade union.

Chronology

1890 Serge's birth (30 December). His real name is Victor Lvovich Kibalchich.

1917 Russian Revolution. Trotsky is a major participant.

Serge is released from prison in France. He goes to Barcelona, then leaves to join the Russian army. He is detained in France as a Bolshevik suspect.

1919 Serge arrives in Petrograd. He works for the Comintern under Zinoviev.

1920–22 Serge participates in Comintern Congresses. He edits various journals.

1921 Kronstadt uprising.

1923–26 Serge serves the Comintern as a secret agent and editor of *Imprekor* in Berlin and Vienna. He returns to Soviet Union to take part in the last stand of the Left Opposition.

1928–38 Serge is engaged predominantly in writing but is forced to send his manuscripts to France. He produces *Year One of the Russian Revolution* (1930), *Men in Prison* (1930), *Birth of Our Power* (1931) and *Conquered City* (1932).

1933 Serge is arrested and deported to Orenburg, where he is joined by young son Vlado.

1935 Congress for the Defence of Culture in Paris. Paris intellectuals campaign in support of Serge.

1936 Serge is released from Orenburg but deprived of Soviet citizenship. His manuscripts are confiscated and he is expelled from USSR. He settles first in Brussels, then Paris. His return to Europe is accompanied by a slander campaign in the Communist Press.

February: election of Popular Front government in Spain.

May: election of Popular Front government in France.

July: Spanish Civil War breaks out.

December: Trotsky exiled to Mexico.

1937 *From Lenin to Stalin* and *Destiny of a Revolution* appear. Serge is elected a councillor to the Spanish POUM. He campaigns against the Moscow trials.

1940 Serge leaves Paris just as the Nazis advance on Marseilles. He tries to obtain a visa. Finally, he finds refuge in Mexico.

Trotsky's death (20 August).

1940–47 Serge lives in isolation and poverty. He writes *The Case of Comrade Tulayev* and *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*.

1947 Serge's death (17 November).

Introduction

This book concerns itself with the central political relationship of Serge's life and the one which dominated his mature years, that with Leon Trotsky. From the time of Serge's arrival in Russia at the height of the civil war in 1919, throughout the tumultuous early years of the Soviet Union, the opposition struggles of the 1920s, exile and beyond, both men's fates became inextricably linked. The core of this book is an examination of how this relationship functioned during one of this century's most crisis-filled epochs that saw the rise of Fascism and Stalinism, with its concomitant political repression, civil war and the most profound crisis to face Socialism until the present day. Thus the dialogues and debates between the two men presented here do much to throw light on the forces that shaped the postwar world and provide us with a window on the alternatives that existed and how the two men articulated their ideas, even during the darkest of days.

If, for most readers, the luminous presence of Leon Trotsky, one of the twentieth century's greatest political thinkers and revolutionaries, needs little introduction, the relatively more obscure figure of Victor Serge may need some background. For despite writing 20 books of history, politics, fiction and even poetry to set alongside a lifetime's journalism in both Europe and the Soviet Union, he remains still only partially revealed, and despite often being quoted in the pages of academic studies of the Soviet Union and of Stalinism and Trotskyism, he is often ill-represented by those who choose to use his work. (Anyone interested should take a look at the example of Deutschner's treatment of Serge in the third volume of his biography of Trotsky, *The Prophet Outcast*).

Serge had been born in Belgium in 1890 to a Russian father and a Polish mother, escaping respectively the arm of the Tsar's secret police and a stifling bourgeois marriage. Serge's early life was one of poverty and struggle and he was quickly drawn to the violent individualist strand of anarchism, editing its newspaper *L'Anarchie*. This connection was to earn Serge his first prison sentence when he became embroiled with the case of the Bonnot Gang – a group of armed bank robbers,

whom Serge defended in the pages of his journal. On his release in 1917 he moved to Barcelona, and began his long physical and political journey that took him from Europe to Russia and back, and eventually to a final exile in Mexico, where he died in 1947. Politically, whilst retaining a loyalty to the principles of anarchist freedom, Serge adopted Marxism as his major frame of reference, under the influence of the events in Russia in 1917. This he maintained throughout his life despite the defeat of its ideals in Russia with the rise of Stalin, the struggle against which became, as with Trotsky, the main focus of his life and work.

The first chapter of the book outlines Serge's early adherence to Bolshevism and the figure of Leon Trotsky. The core of the work then deals with the relations between the two men in the wake of the defeat of the Trotskyist and Joint Opposition in Russia, concentrating on the period of intense activity during the 1930s. This is achieved by examining their private correspondence, as in Chapter 2, and by looking at the effects of the Spanish Civil War and Trotsky's attempts at forming a new International as a counter-balance to the Second (Socialist International) and Third (Communist International). A final assessment is made of Serge within the Trotskyist movement and as an 'Oppositionist' in Chapter 5.

In his introduction to Chapter 1, Philip Spencer traces the passage of Victor Serge from his political roots in anarchism to his 'particular' acceptance of Marxism. In doing so Spencer shows us how Serge was struck by the revolution's early libertarian aspects, adopting what he described, in Marcel Liebman's phrase, a form of 'libertarian Leninism' that for the rest of Serge's life formed the basis of his political thought, however tarnished the original ideals of the revolution had become. The documents in this chapter reveal to us Serge's early awareness and appreciation of the figure and personality of Leon Trotsky, with sections from 'La Ville en danger' about the civil war siege of Petrograd. In the letter to Comrade Michel we glean Serge's disillusionment with the trajectory of the revolution, which also reveals to us the extent to which he maintained a deep commitment to his former comrades, the anarchists. With the inclusion of extracts from 'The Tragic Face of Revolution' and 'The Problems of the Dictatorship', his early writings on the revolution, a useful contrast can be gained with later writings on similar themes in Chapter 4.

Chapter 2 concentrates on the cycle of correspondence exchanged between the two men following Serge's release from the Soviet Union in 1936, up until their final communication in 1939, amid acrimony and estrangement, a full year before the death of Leon Trotsky. In the

introduction to the correspondence I describe the circumstances behind Serge's release and the anxiety of both men to resume an intimate contact after so many years of hardship. The introduction then goes on to follow the intricacies of their epistolary relations set against the background of the rise of Fascism, the consolidation of Stalin's position in Russia and the emergence of Popular Front governments in both France and Spain. It continues by showing how their later relationship was clouded by disagreements on the Spanish Revolution and the Fourth International, the formation of which Trotsky believed was his most important task outside the Soviet Union, and over which Serge had many reservations.

In Chapter 3, 'Serge, Trotsky and the Spanish Revolution' we see how Serge's dissensions from Trotsky's line on the Popular Front, already evident in the correspondence, began to create the preconditions for their eventual rift. We see how their conflicting assessments of various individuals, who at one time or another were close to both men, were a by-product of their altogether different organisational outlooks. We also see how these tensions, principally over Nin and the POUM, erupted into larger disagreements on the nature of Bolshevik history and the organisation of a new revolutionary vanguard – a process which is examined by Suzi Weissman in Chapter 4.

In her introduction to this chapter, 'Kronstadt and the Fourth International', Weissman provides us with a study of these controversies, principally over the Kronstadt revolt of 1921 following the crushing of the revolutionary wing of the Spanish Republican movement in 1937. Its context became the issue of Bolshevik history and provided Serge with a basis for a change in political direction which, if not a deviation from Marxism as such, was certainly a move away from the 'Bolshevik-Leninism' of Leon Trotsky. Weissman shows us how the agents of the GPU at the heart of the Trotskyist movement may well have exploited these controversies further with the issue of the publicity surrounding Serge's translation of Trotsky's *Their Morals and Ours*, to make it appear that Serge was slandering Trotsky's work and sabotaging the Fourth International. She further demonstrates that if these moves were not entirely successful, they did prevent a free exchange of ideas between the two men that could have provided the basis for a renewed understanding. For as we can see from the documents in Chapter 4, throughout the Kronstadt controversy and indeed in his essay 'Marxism in Our Time' Serge was as committed to International Socialism as Trotsky himself. Whatever their disagreements, Serge always retained the healthiest

respect for Trotsky the man and thinker, if not for some of those who had attached themselves to him in later years.

In Chapter 5, 'Victor Serge and the Left Opposition' an assessment is made of Serge's contribution to the Oppositionist struggle against Stalin. In his introduction, Philip Spencer places Serge at the centre of Trotsky's struggle against Stalin both in Russia and later in the West; and shows that, despite whatever dissensions and disagreements they were later to have, Serge's Marxism was thoroughly 'Trotskyist' in character and would remain so. The documents in the chapter attest to that assertion and include 'The Old Man – The Fourth International', extracted from Serge's *From Lenin to Stalin*. Reactions to this book formed the centre of Communist slander against Serge in the 1930s, which prompted Trotsky's stout defence of Serge's contribution to the revolution. Also included is a previously unpublished piece by Serge called simply 'On Trotskyism'; an obituary of Trotsky's son Leon Sedov which contains much about Serge's deep commitment to their mutual cause; and a powerful evocation of the 'Old Man' himself in his obituary of Leon Trotsky, 'In Memory', written for *Partisan Review*, which lacks nothing of Serge's deep honesty in its assessment of Trotsky's life. The chapter concludes with some short entries from Serge's *Carnets* from the year 1944, when he too was living out his final exile in Mexico City, where Trotsky had met his death at the hand of Stalin's assassin.

What will be clear to the reader at the end of this book is that Victor Serge was no passive receptor of or mere servitor to the thoughts and actions of Leon Trotsky, but was himself passionately engaged in the pursuit of ideas and ideals and was an honest though critical friend to Trotsky. But if the polemic between the two contained here has the ring of tragedy, is it our tragedy also? For Serge himself, in transit once again to a final exile amidst a world torn apart by war, concluded his *Memoirs* thus:

The future seems to me to be full of possibilities greater than we have glimpsed throughout the past. May the passion, the experience and even the faults of my fighting generation have some small power to illuminate the way forward!

D.J. Cotterill
London, November 1993

1 Victor Serge and Bolshevism

Introduction by Philip Spencer

For Victor Serge, as for many of his contemporaries, the Russian Revolution marked a turning point in his political life. It forced upon him a major shift in his political allegiances, a break with previous affiliations and the adoption of a new political theory and practice, revolutionary Marxism, to which he had hitherto been deeply hostile. This new commitment was not lightly undertaken nor was it in its essentials ever to be abandoned. It was the result of a number of experiences and choices which were common to many on the left in those years but which were faced, and articulated, by Serge in his own unique way. Cumulatively, these choices led him to adopt a particular form of Bolshevism with a distinctive political accent: what might be called, following Marcel Liebman, a 'libertarian Leninism', whose inspiration lay in the dynamic of the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the particular role that Serge perceived the Bolshevik Party to play within it.¹ This new political creed was never to be abandoned by Serge, despite the enormous pressures brought to bear upon him both personally and politically in subsequent years. It gave him a coherent frame of reference within which to work and think and write in the decades that followed. In all the major phases of his political life henceforth there was to be a consistency of vision and unity of purpose which sustained him through the darkest hours.

Prewar Anarchism

The path taken by Serge in arriving at this position was not an easy one. As with many others on the left before the First World War, Serge's loyalties were structured by the seemingly fundamental divide between anarchism on the one hand and Socialists (in whose ranks the Bolsheviks figured only as a fairly small if vocally radical section) on the other. This division had its roots in the classic dispute between Marx and Bakunin at the time of the First International of 1864, over the role of politics

and the state in revolution. In the era of the Second International, formed in 1889, these divisions had hardened considerably.² Anarchists were contemptuous of the whole world of Socialist politics, with its bureaucratically organised labour movements and mass political parties increasingly preoccupied with parliamentary politics and legalised trade unionism. Within anarchist circles, Serge was mostly associated with the individualistic wing, where contempt for what was seen as the reformist collusion of the organised left led some to acts of individual revolt and protest. It was his loyalty to these associates that landed him his first jail sentence in France for refusing to cooperate with the state's prosecution of the infamous Bonnot Gang, a terrorist anarchist group of uncertain politics and provenance.³

War

Serge thus found himself in prison when the First World War broke out. There he had time and space (he was originally in solitary confinement) to meditate on the limitations of these primitive rebellions against society. Much as he admired 'the exacting idealism of uncomplicated men [who,] conscious of their frustration, battled like madmen', he could not help but reflect pessimistically on the vicious cycle of protest and repression within which they had been locked:

In those times, the world was an integrated structure, so stable in its appearance that no possibility of substantial change was visible within it [...] Above the heads of the masses, wealth accumulated, insolent and proud. The consequences of this situation arose inexorably: crime, class struggles and their trail of bloody strikes, and the frenzied battles of One against All.

But none of these struggles held out much hope of success. In the end, even anarchism as an ideology of change and resistance had collapsed in the bourgeois jungle.⁴

The war shattered the stability of capitalist Europe and, for all its savage destructiveness, opened up new possibilities:

This storm interpreted the world for us. For me, it heralded another purifying tempest [...] Revolutionaries knew quite well that this autocratic Europe, with its hangmen, its pogroms, its finery, its famines, its Siberian jails and ancient iniquity, could never survive the war.⁵

The impact of the war was felt everywhere, not least on the left. Old lines of division had to be radically redrawn, less on the basis of doctrinal difference (such as had pitted anarchists like Serge against Socialists of all stripes) than on the basis of response to the war. In the belligerent countries the majority, whether anarchist or Socialist, followed their leaders initially in supporting the war, in putting loyalty to (capitalist) nation far above loyalty to class, even to the point of gaily marching off to the front line to slaughter fellow workers.⁶ Only a minority, again either anarchist or Socialist, stood firm to their prewar principles and opposed the war. All across Europe tiny groups gathered, hesitantly at first, to voice opposition to the war – in France, the *Vie Ouvrière* group around Alfred Rosmer and Pierre Monatte; in Germany, Rosa Luxemburg (jailed for her pains), Karl Liebknecht and a handful of followers. Only in far-off Russia did a significant majority on the left, the Bolsheviks, emerge to take the clearest and most radical position, denouncing the war as an inter-imperialist rivalry and supporters of the war as chauvinist traitors to the working class. Lenin's call for a radical realignment on the left, for a new international movement based on revolutionary opposition to the war, was to lead to a dramatic recomposition on the left, in which the prewar divisions between anarchists and Socialists were to play little or no role.⁷

In the isolation of prison, Serge may have known little or nothing of this or any other opposition, nor sensed yet its deeper logic. Independently, however, he had come to a similar judgement. 'The prospect of victory by either side appalled us [...] The two coalitions had practically the same social organisation: republics based on high finance [...] the same liberties equally stifled by exploitation.'⁸ The question of how to smash the exploitative social system that created this nightmare now posed itself more urgently than ever.

Spain

Released from jail and expelled from belligerent France, Serge made his way to Spain, where revolution was already in the air, in circumstances not unlike those which, on the other side of the continent, were ultimately to propel the Bolsheviks to power in Russia. Finding work as a linotypist in Barcelona, Serge gravitated, still loosely within an anarchist frame of reference, to the most radical organisation on the Spanish left, the revolutionary syndicalist organisation, the CNT. Here, news of the first of the Russian Revolutions of 1917, the February rising which swept away the Tsar, was greeted with enthusiasm:

Reading the dispatches from Russia, we were transfigured: for the images they conveyed were simple, concrete. A minute clarity was shed over things: the world was no longer impelled along by helpless lunacy [...] The Spaniards [...] instinctively understood the Petrograd days, since their imagination transposed those events to Madrid and Barcelona.⁹

Imagination was followed by action: the Barcelona uprisings of that year were, to Serge, clear indications that everywhere what he called 'the same, intensely alive electric current, [was] crossing from the trenches to the factories, the same violent hopes [were] coming to birth'.¹⁰ Even the defeat of the Barcelona uprisings did not diminish Serge's hopes.¹¹ But increasingly those hopes were vested elsewhere, in Russia – the land of his parents and, more vitally now, the prospective site of a successful revolution, although it transpired that this was to be one led by a political party, the Bolsheviks, which issued in the extreme form from the very Socialist tradition Serge had long opposed.

Serge determined to go to Russia to experience the revolution at first hand, not just as an observer but as a full participant; to put himself, as he said with commendable frankness to the Russian embassy in Barcelona, at the service of the revolution. For Serge, the gravitational pull of the revolution was irresistible. 'We felt', he wrote later:

as if we were leaving the void and entering the kingdom of the will [...] A land awaited us where life was beginning anew, where conscious will, intelligence and an inexorable love of mankind were in action. Behind us, all Europe was ablaze, having choked almost to death in the fog of its own massacres. Barcelona's flame smouldered on. Germany was in the thick of revolution, Austro-Hungary was splitting into free nations. Italy was spread with red flags [...] This was only the beginning.¹²

The Russian Revolution and Bolshevism

On the long tortuous journey to Russia, beset by obstacles both physical and political, Serge's political ideas clarified, increasingly focused by the significance of developments in the country itself. By now, of course, the Bolshevik revolution had taken place. Serge's response was unequivocal. For him the revolution was inevitable; it could not, as he put it 'stop halfway. The avalanche would carry on rolling right to the end [...] the peasants seize the land, and the workers the factories'.¹³ This

was of course precisely the Bolshevik programme of 1917: land, peace, bread and all power to the soviets! Despite the chaos and devastation that Serge fully recognised and never hid from himself or others,¹⁴ the basic choice confronting him seemed clear: either to throw in his lot with the Bolsheviks as the party that had led the revolution to victory; or to adopt, passively at best, the camp of counter-revolution. Serge had no doubts. As a revolutionary, whatever his early anarchist criticisms of the Marxist view, he was radically inspired by the achievements of the Russian masses and their Bolshevik leaders. In the revolution Serge saw the realisation of his deepest beliefs and hopes. For the first time, the masses had risen up not simply in destructive defiance but to smash the very structures of oppression which had claimed them, setting up instead a radically new type of organisation, the 'Commune-State' as Serge was henceforth always to refer to it.

Libertarian Leninism

The use of this term (drawn directly from Lenin's *State and Revolution*, itself written in the middle of 1917) to describe the Russian Revolution signifies something of the ideological distance Serge had now travelled. His adherence to the Bolshevik party was more than conjunctural. In his enthusiasm for the revolution, Serge put all hesitations behind him and became a revolutionary Marxist, a Leninist in both theory and practice. At the same time, there was a deep continuity with his most basic political identifications. For there was no real defection here on Serge's part, no forswearing of his deepest commitments. Rather, Serge recognised in Bolshevism a means of realising those commitments most effectively, of translating dream and idea into reality. On this henceforth he was to be emphatic. It was the role of the Bolsheviks in leading the revolution, the Bolsheviks as the vanguard party of the revolution which commanded his adherence.

The revolution itself was for Serge a fundamentally libertarian phenomenon, radically democratic in both form and content at every level – focused by the destruction of the repressive apparatus of army and police, workers' control of the factories, and above all soviets as direct, revokable forms of government. The Bolshevik dispersal of the Constituent Assembly as an inferior bourgeois political form in favour of a new soviet form of government and representation, an act which has outraged liberal democrats for decades, met with Serge's clear approval. Following Lenin, Serge saw the soviets as an altogether more representative and more accountable form of democracy. Representa-

tion through universal suffrage was seen as inferior, insensitive to shifts in opinion, incapable of registering the revolutionary dynamic of workers wanting to take power directly into their own hands. The radicalisation of the masses in 1917 and their corresponding shift towards the Bolsheviks themselves had taken place at the level of mandated, revokable delegates in the soviet.¹⁵

The Vanguard Party

In the heat of revolution the Bolshevik Party which drove this radical political process forward appeared in a new light to Serge the ex-anarchist. Strategically he was in full agreement with a Marxist party which, embracing the programme of permanent revolution, cast aside the narrow shackles of orthodox Marxism with its historical schema dictating to workers what was and was not permissible in this period. But it was the evidence of how the Bolshevik Party translated this strategy into action which made the most impact on him. This had both a negative and a positive side. On the one hand, Serge was forced to witness the practical failure of the anarchism whose ideological weakness he had already acknowledged in prison.¹⁶ On the other, the Bolsheviks had filled this vacuum magnificently, had in fact acted as he had always believed that anarchists should have done; 'taken up', as he put it, 'the responsibilities that the anarchists were incapable of assuming'.¹⁷

But it was more than a question of simple replacement. Serge followed the logic of the argument through to its conclusions. He now recognised and argued the need for a party in a way that would have been impossible for him before the war. In the 1922 article written for the French revolutionary-syndicalist journal *La Vie ouvrière*, Serge traced this logic quite specifically, arguing that readers of that political persuasion (which until recently had been his too) should recognise as he had done that the 'very logic of the facts' dictated the need for a party like the Bolsheviks. Here Serge articulated the classically Leninist themes of uneven levels of consciousness among the masses and the consequent need for a vanguard to combat the regressive tug of reactionary ideas. But, characteristically, he identified the leadership qualities of such a party in principle, and the Bolsheviks as a model in practice, in a particular way.

For Serge, the vanguard character of the party had to be proven – earned, if you will – in practice. This for him had been the signal achievement of the Bolsheviks in the revolution itself. The Bolsheviks came to power because they gained respect, because their solutions, their

programme, their strategy made sense, pointed a way forwards.¹⁸ But this leadership was not a simple, mechanical one-way process. In Serge's view, there was a profound interplay between the party and the masses in 1917 in which each learned from and shaped the other. The masses 'also create', as he put it; they were not inert or pliable or passive. Much of Serge's writing about the Russian working class in revolution lays great stress on its creativity, its capacity to invent solutions for problems, its moral qualities developed in the heat of struggle. The party's role was to turn these qualities to best advantage, to give clearer shape to the masses' 'confused aspirations shot through with flashes of intelligence'.¹⁹

Organisation

The Bolshevik Party was able to play this role, according to Serge, not only because it had a programme which made sense of these aspirations and pointed a way forward, but because of the way in which it was organised, because of the kind of political party it had become. Here again Serge felt impelled to draw radical conclusions from the evidence of anarchist practice:

The anarchists were rendered incapable of any practical initiative through their divisions [...] their lack of organisation and discipline. Whatever they enjoyed in the way of real capacities and energies were wasted in small chaotic struggles [...] They were an amorphous group without definite contours or directing organs – that is to say without a brain or a nervous system [...] at the mercy of the most contradictory aims [...] irresponsible individual intelligences dominated by cliques, by alien pressures of a highly suspect kind and by group instincts, dissipating themselves to no effect.²⁰

The Bolsheviks presented a sharp contrast: unified, disciplined, able to act as an effective pole of attraction at the decisive moment. This unity and discipline, according to Serge, was achieved in a particular way. It was the product (again) of a powerful radical democratic current which simultaneously both injected into the party a host of new members at every level of the organisation and infused it with a capacity for intense, often dramatic political debate. The new members brought a vitality, a temper, a dynamism to the organisation which, as Lenin himself recognised, was in danger of going elsewhere in the early months of the revolution.²¹ At the highest level, of course, the coopting

of Trotsky, the actual author of the theory of permanent revolution, into the leadership of the party was in one sense an implicit recognition of the party's decisive shift of strategy in 1917.²²

The quality of debate inside the party, produced in part by this influx of members and in part by pressure from outside, was extremely high. Debates, as Serge both witnessed and described them, took place throughout the revolutionary period across a whole range of topics, from questions of tactics to art, culture and utopian speculation. Several debates centred not just on the line of the party but on the specific fates of individuals, not excluding those of the leaders of the party itself. One debate, for example, concerned the composition of the first post-revolutionary government and the possible exclusion of both Lenin and Trotsky from it.²³ Yet these debates were settled in a remarkably comradely spirit, without fear, intimidation or future prejudice. The unity of the party was in a real sense the product of its ability to contain, survive, even grow from these debates without resort to manoeuvre, splitting, expulsion or anathema.

Leninisms

It was this party and this revolution then that won Serge's commitment. His Leninism was thus a specifically revolutionary product, the fruit of the experience and observation of a Bolshevik Party whose vanguard status was validated in and by a revolution of a radically democratic character. At the same time, as many of the writings here show, Serge did not idealise either the party, the masses or the revolution itself. He recognised fully from the outset the terrible conditions that soon surrounded the revolution – civil war, foreign intervention, famine and disease. But he was not disposed to explain all subsequent deviations from the principles of 1917 as automatic consequences of the objectively difficult circumstances in which the revolutionaries found themselves. In his history and fiction of the period, as well as in the writings here, he showed an acute awareness of the limitations of all parties concerned in the drama of a revolution under siege from within and without. But his criticisms, unlike so many that have flowed from ex- and anti-communists ever since (and beaten out so insistently today), were articulated from within the framework he established in his fundamental commitment to the revolution of 1917, in the libertarian Leninism whose main lineaments have been sketched here.

It was the party's departures from its own norms and traditions, from the example it had itself set in 1917, that he condemned. Having

credited the party in the first place with its achievements as a party of libertarian revolution, he criticised the role it subsequently played in its own degeneration. In a sense it was precisely because he had come to see the importance of the party, its centrality in and to the revolution, that he was able to identify so clearly the subjective factor at work. But these criticisms did not then or later undermine or invalidate his libertarian version of Leninism. This was strong and rich enough to acknowledge the real dangers posed by the emergence of an opposing version or tendency within Leninism, an authoritarian mentality which ran directly counter to the spirit of 1917. On occasion his focus was sharp enough to induce a sense of not only impending but present tragedy (as the title of the piece for *La Vie ouvrière* itself denotes).

As that tragedy unfolded, Serge's commitment was to be tested to the limit. As later chapters will show, the fundamentally libertarian character and inspiration of his Leninism, forged in these early years, was to bring him over time into often painful and difficult conflicts with some – Trotsky most tragically – who had been in part first cause and object of that commitment, but who developed a different vision and drew different lessons from it. None of these pressures and conflicts, however, could extinguish for Serge the original libertarian inspiration he had drawn from the revolution and Bolshevik Party of 1917. This was to provide him with his own, unique frame of reference from now on, a guide to theory and practice in the testing times that lay ahead.

THE DOCUMENTS

Victor Serge, Petrograd. Extract from 'La Ville en danger'²⁴

An article by Trotsky

This evening *Izvestia* publishes a key article by Trotsky: 'Petrograd Defends Itself from Within as Well'. Two columns of cool and logical arguments; its logic is terrible and crisp.

As I read it I evoke his metallic voice, his regular gestures, his grave but deliberately simple martial bearing, the concentrated, self-assured, imperturbable energy that emanates from his whole person. No one but he could have written an article like that, styled so simply, powerfully and inflexibly.

From the military standpoint, he explains, the most advantageous course at present would be to draw the enemy into the city and fight him there. Since the telephone and telegraph network are in our hands, with strategic points fortified and defended with the participation of the

working-class populace, Petrograd's maze of streets, canals and houses transformed into fortresses or places of ambush would become the cemetery of the White Army. There are still a few lines where he discusses the sparing of artistic treasures or of innocent victims 'the blame for whose bloodshed cannot in any case be laid to our account', but the conclusion has no ambiguity. If the regular army cannot fulfil its task, Petrograd must look to its own defence, within its own walls. 'Be ready, Petrograd! Perhaps it falls to you to write in these October days the most glorious page of your history!'

When a leader of the army writes like this, the nervous inhabitant, accustomed to the compulsory optimism of the authorities, believes that the worst has come. That evening the atmosphere is charged with anxiety. I have just been reading this article from an issue of *Izvestia* that has been posted up on the Nevsky Prospect.

A large and silent multitude has formed in front of the poster-newspaper. Suddenly we all give a jump: somewhere behind the Gostinny Dvor, on the other side of the embankment, a bomb has apparently exploded. But this is purely a nervous reaction which troubles nobody. Evening descends, grey and sullen with rain.

In the homes of the inhabitants conversation is marked by an onset of panic. It is said that aeroplanes have just bombarded Smolny; or that a bomb has demolished a house on the Sadovaya. None of it is true. Where do these rumours come from? They spring unconsciously from the fear and over-excitement of popular imaginations; and they are spread from one centre of gossip to another, unconsciously enlarged and distorted.

The organisation of the inner-city defence came about instantly. In order to prompt, it was necessary only to use the grid of the Communist Party to mobilise responsible and active members, a task of a few hours. Thanks to the exact inventory of its forces, to the centralisation of initiatives, to the close juxtaposition of the party machinery with that of government, all the city's energies are guided away from their habitual functions to concentrate on one project exclusively: the preparation for war in the city, which will be defended street by street and house by house.

Lev Davidovich Trotsky

Nevsky Prospect: here are two cars coming into view, stopping at a traffic block. In the crowd of passers-by, brief hints are exchanged. A name passes from mouth to mouth. Both cars are unenclosed. I notice the second one first, a large, neat vehicle with comfortable black padded