

Victor Serge: The Worst of the Anarchists

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Victor Serge (1890–1947) is experiencing something of a revival. This is understandable, given the power of Serge’s prose and the events and people he wrote about. A complete translation of his *Memoirs of a Revolutionary* (*Memoirs*¹) was published in 2012 while collections of his earliest pro-Bolshevik writings (*Danger*²) and discussions with Trotsky (*Papers*³) appeared in the 1990s to supplement Serge’s *Year One of the Russian Revolution* (*Year One*⁴) which has been available since the 1970s. Now the (updated) paperback version of Susan Weissman’s much praised biography of Serge has appeared. (*Serge*⁵)

Although a very well researched book, Weissman’s biography does come across as an extended commentary on Serge’s own *Memoirs*. This is its fundamental problem – Serge’s *Memoirs* are self-serving and unreliable. Weissman writes of Serge’s contradictions, yet they are no such thing if you do not share the illusions of Trotskyism and its ignorance of the Russian Revolution. For what appears as contradictions are simply the clash between Serge’s *Memoirs* and the works he produced as an orthodox Bolshevik.⁶ We need to look at *all* his life from an anarchist perspective to fully appreciate the relevance of Serge, the flaws in his politics and Weissman’s biography.

The story of Serge is well known: anarchist turned Bolshevik, he joined Trotsky’s Left Opposition to defend genuine (democratic) socialism from Stalinism. Indeed, any anarchist discussing the Russian Revolution with a Leninist will, eventually, have Serge mentioned to them as he is considered the exemplar of “the best of the anarchists” who joined the Bolsheviks.⁷ However, it is a myth.

The reality is less flattering to the Leninist tradition: an elitist individualist-anarchist⁸ becomes an elitist-Bolshevik, turning against Stalin in favour of dictatorship by an internally democratic party before, finally, turning against Trotsky towards most of the conclusions of the revolutionary class struggle anarchism he had never embraced previously.

This is downplayed in his *Memoirs*, along with how much they were written with the benefit of hindsight. This explains the palpable contradiction between his later works and early Bolshevik apologetics as well as his systematic portrayal of the Bolsheviks and Oppositionists in the most favourable light. That this involves some revisionism comes as no surprise. For example, Serge claimed that the Left Opposition supporting workers’ democracy (*Memoirs* 293, 300) yet this was not the case. As he had acknowledged a few years previously it had only demanded “the restoration of inner-Party democracy” and “never dared dispute the theory of single-party government.” (*Papers* 181)

¹ Victor Serge, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary* (New York: New York Review Book, 2012).

² *Revolution in Danger: Writings from Russia, 1919–1921* (London: Redwords, 1997).

³ *The Serge-Trotsky Papers*, D. J. Cotterill (Ed.) (London: Pluto Press, 1994).

⁴ *Year One of the Russian Revolution* (London/New York: Bookmarks, Pluto Press and Writers and Readers, 1992).

⁵ *Victor Serge: A Political Biography* (London: Verso, 2013). The book was first published in 2001 as *Victor Serge: The course is set on hope*.

⁶ This was usefully explored by Peter Sedgwick in his posthumously published “The Unhappy Elitist: Victor Serge’s Early Bolshevism” (*History Workshop: A Journal of Socialist and Feminist Historians*, Issue 17, Spring 1984). Sedgwick, the person most responsible for introducing the English speaking world by translating both *Memoirs* and *Year One of the Russian Revolution*, noted this work “is on the whole most unrevealing of any libertarian impulsion”, “an uncritical retailing of the official legitimations of Bolshevik statism” and the “contrast is obvious between the Serge of libertarian reputation and the author of these manifestos for the elite leadership of the Bolsheviks.” (151)

⁷ Lenin’s term, quoted by Serge (*Memoirs* 122). Interestingly, none of the anarchists mentioned (Borghgi, Souchy, Pestaña, Lepetit) became Leninists.

⁸ The notion that Serge became a syndicalist is based on a six month period spent in Barcelona in 1917 (*Serge*, 12), hardly time to come to fully come to grasp its ideas after more than a decade of individualist-elitism.

These contradictions can be seen in Weissman's biography which refutes its own claim that "Serge always saw democracy as an integral component of socialist development" and that it was the "Stalinist scourge [which] nearly eradicated the notion that socialism is full democracy" by showing not only that "full democracy" was eliminated under Lenin but also that Trotsky's Opposition did not aim to re-introduce it. (*Serge* 19, xvii) Moreover, her work is flawed simply because she has little knowledge of the defining feature of her own ideology – namely the Russian Revolution and the reality, rather than rhetoric, of Bolshevism. That this flaw inflicts all Trotskyist accounts of the revolution does not excuse her.

The Anarchists

Serge lumps all of anarchism with his individualist past, ignoring the real differences between his elitist individualism and the class-struggle orientation of the communist- and syndicalist-anarchist mainstream. Weissman follows him in this, blissfully proclaiming Serge "a Left Opposition with an anarchist past" (*Serge* 4) and failing to mention the differences between his politics and, say, Kropotkin's.

This blurring of different tendencies reflects a general ignorance of anarchism. She proclaims that Marxists have the advantage over anarchists because of their "understanding of class, of individuals consciously acting in collectivities in the process of history." As if were not the revolutionary anarchist position since Bakunin! So if Serge came to "see anarchism as a dead end as early as 1913" because of the individualistic antics of the Bonnot gang (*Serge* 21, 19) then most anarchists had come to the same conclusion... in the 1880s by repeating the ideas of Bakunin.⁹ This is acknowledged by Serge, who admits that most anarchists had "advocated for many years class warfare, direct action" (*Danger*, 96)¹⁰ – although he did not mention his own rejection of this position.

Marxists, we are further informed, consider that "freedom is indistinguishable from institutions of popular democracy, usually in the form of councils" while anarchists "are wary of democratic *institutions* – even workers councils – and tend to describe freedom in less concrete terms". (*Serge* 13) That Proudhon and Bakunin, not Marx, had advocated workers councils (based on elected, mandated and recallable delegates) seems unknown. Surely Proudhon's "agricultural-industrial federation"¹¹, Bakunin's "federation of insurgent [workers'] associations, communes and provinces" and "organisation of the trade sections, their federation in the International, and their representation by Chambers of Labour"¹² as well as Kropotkin's unions which are the "natural organs for the direct struggle with capitalism and for the composition of the future social order"¹³ are all *institutions*?

So Serge was right that no anarchist "can make any serious objection to the principle of soviet power" (*Danger*, 96) given that Proudhon, Bakunin and Kropotkin had all envisioned precisely

⁹ See Caroline Cahm's *Kropotkin and the Rise of Revolutionary Anarchism 1872–1886* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) for an excellent discussion of anarchist views on the labour movement from the 1860s to 1880s.

¹⁰ See section H.2.2 of *An Anarchist FAQ* (Edinburgh/Oakland: AK Press, 2012) volume 2.

¹¹ *Property is Theft! A Pierre-Joseph Proudhon Anthology* (Edinburgh/Oakland: AK Press, 2011), Iain McKay (ed.), 709.

¹² *Bakunin on Anarchism* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1980), Sam Dolgoff (ed.), 153, 255.

¹³ quoted in Paul Avrich, *The Russian Anarchists* (Edinburgh/Oakland: AK Press, 2005), 81.

such organisations but “soviet power” in the Bolshevik lexicon did not mean “the power of the soviets to manage society” but rather “the party leadership to which the soviets passed their power” – Serge’s “proletarian party, the organisation of the most hardened, most conscious revolutionary minority, which will in fact exercise the dictatorship before long.” (*Papers* 21) As such, it is incredulous for Weissman to proclaim Serge “opposed one-Party rule in 1918” when he quickly embraced it when he arrived in Russian in 1919. She does recount Serge’s famous passage in his *Memoirs* on how he horrified he was by Zinoviev’s article on “The Monopoly of Power” but, like Serge, fails to note how well he hid it from the public reading his works. (*Serge* 4,13)

Similarly, few anarchists would disagree with Serge’s claim that the socialist state “will not disappear of its own accord” particularly as it is based on “the fusion of political and economic power” and is “served by a bureaucracy which will not hesitate to attribute privileges to itself.” (*Danger* 109) The question is, given this, why did he join and defend it? If, as Weissman proclaims, Serge had concluded that “the extended functions of the modern state... made obsolete the notion of the abolition of the state” what does this mean for the Marxist notion that the state “withers away”? Particularly if, as Marxists do, you *increase* its functions? And given that anarchists had been warning about the danger of state socialism since Proudhon, it is staggering to read Weissman note it was “sobering to realise” that Stalinism showed that “collectivism was no synonymous with socialism” and “could in fact be anti-socialist, manifesting new forms of exploitation.” (*Serge* xvii) Anarchists, in contrast, saw their fears confirmed when Lenin and Trotsky ruled the roost.

Similarly when Serge recalls that concluding the Russian workers and peasants had to expropriate capital and land in 1917 meant he was “on the line” advocated by Lenin (*Memoirs* 70) we must remember that this was “the line” raised by Kropotkin and other anarchists during the 1905 revolution (and rejected at the time by all Marxists) and that this had been argued for since the 1870s.

We can, of course, sympathise with Serge’s despair with the Russian Anarchist movement, although his caveat of “with the exception of the Ukraine” cannot be ignored. We can conclude the problem lies not with anarchism as such but rather anarchists. Particularly given that the Bolshevik revolution confirmed our theory – both negatively (in the failure of state socialism) and positively (in the success of the Makhnovists in the Ukraine). This can be seen when Serge recommends Kropotkin’s *The Great French Revolution* for “understanding the terrible necessities of the Russian revolution” yet that work was written precisely to show the incorrectness of assertions, like Serge’s, that “historical experience and logic lead us to the *inevitability of Jacobinism*” as well as its counter-revolutionary nature. It also shows the inadequateness of Serge’s claim that history showed no “revolution without a revolutionary dictatorship” for the examples used (the English and French revolutions) were from one form of class society to another. (*Danger* 102, 120, 106, 92) If the Bolsheviks were repeating the bourgeois revolutions, can we be surprised at the outcome was a new form of class society rather than socialism?

Yet to point this out is considered by some as “objectively counter-revolutionary.” It is uneasy to see Weissman inflict an amalgam worthy of the Stalinists on her readers – rather than Trotsky-Fascists we have Anarchist-Whites and Menshevik-Whites inflicted upon us. Thus we find that Anarchists and Mensheviks “all opposed the Bolsheviks and formed part of the counter-revolution” yet the latter “opposed” the Bolsheviks within the Soviet Constitution (and expelled *all* members who joined the counter-revolution) while the former opposed the Bolsheviks for their violations of the principles and hopes of the revolution – like party dictatorship, one-man

management, repression of strikes, etc. She talks of some anarchists who “took up arms against the new workers’ state and became objectively counter-revolutionary” and footnotes Makhno before a few pages later noting that he “fought the Whites will opposing the Bolsheviks” (*Serge* 28, 21, 28) but somehow fails to mention that the Makhnovists “took up arms” against the Bolsheviks only in self-defence. That the Bolsheviks turned against the Makhnovists because they had the gall to call soviet congresses to discuss the direction of the revolution is equally unworthy of comment.

Simply put, Serge may have seen “the anarchists’ failure to support the Bolsheviks as objective support for the counter-revolution” but how different is that from Stalinists equation of the Left Opposition with fascism? Or, for that matter, her statement that both sides in the Cold War argued “early Bolshevism” was “no different from mature Stalinism”? (*Serge* 20, xii) The revolutionary (libertarian) critique of Bolshevism is now damned by association, being no different from the Stalinist or Cold-Warrior position. Yet is it really that different to striking workers if they were repressed by the Cheka or the GPU? After all, as Serge argued in March 1922:

“Multitudes are sometimes under the sway of irrational instincts... This is particularly so when these masses are weary or exhausted after long years of struggle. At such moments, leaders may appear to be standing firm against the masses’ wish, and to be committing violence against them. But it is in these moments that the leaders embody the genuine higher interests of the masses... The same observations hold true of the party, and of the relations between party and masses.” (*Papers* 17–18)

Serge asked who “represented the higher interests of the toilers” (quoted, *Serge* 45) – the party or the masses? He sided with the party. To quote Proudhon’s polemic against state socialism: “you have made yourselves the apostles of authority; worshippers of power, you think only of strengthening it and muzzling liberty; your favourite maxim is that the welfare of the people must be achieved in spite of the people”¹⁴

The implications of this choice are stark. If, as Serge proclaimed to the anarchists, “there can be no proletarian dictatorship *without the effective and permanent supervision of the masses* over institutions and people” then how this exist under “the dictatorship of *a party*”? This exposes the nonsense of Serge’s talk of “the terrorism of the masses in times of civil war” (*Danger* 96, 103, 97) – the terrorism was that of the Cheka and Red Army *against* the masses. As Lenin suggested in 1920:

“Without revolutionary coercion directed against the avowed enemies of the workers and peasants, it is impossible to break down the resistance of these exploiters. On the other hand, revolutionary coercion is bound to be employed towards the wavering and unstable elements among the masses themselves.”¹⁵

Needless to say, it was the Party that determined who such elements were. Serge, in short, turned the “question of revolutionary defence” (*Danger* 97) – which no revolutionary anarchist had ever denied¹⁶ – into a defence of the Cheka and a Red Army without internal democracy,

¹⁴ *Property is Theft!*, 225–6.

¹⁵ *Collected Works* 42: 170.

¹⁶ See section H.2.1 of *An Anarchist FAQ* volume 2.

bodies of armed men separate from the general population (to use Engels' term utilised by Lenin to express what the so-called "workers' state" was meant to end). Instead, anarchists have argued for a democratic military since Proudhon¹⁷ and Bakunin and Kropotkin argued that the defence of the revolution required federated workers' militias, a position the Makhnovists applied.

Ultimately, if Serge was right and the Bolshevik revolution shows the weakness of the anarchist position on this matter then, to be consistent, Marxists must rip-up Lenin's *State and Revolution* – but for some reason they do not.

So some honesty would not go amiss. Weissman could easily have argued that a revolution needs a state in the normal sense of the word; that the first act of the revolution has to be the creation of a party executive *above* the councils; that this executive must abrogate powers previously held in the councils for itself, as required; that military democracy be ended by decree; that workers' need "dictatorial" one-man management; that workers councils must be gerrymandered or abolished to maintain party power; that party dictatorship will be imposed, as required; that the "workers' state" must repress the workers, their strikes and protests in their "higher interests", as required; and if you protest that this violates socialist principles than you are "objectively counter-revolutionary" and need repressing.

While wrong, at least you can debate that position. Instead we get cant about Marxism being "full democracy", "the synonymity of Marxian socialism and democracy" and democracy being "integral" to the revolutionary process. (*Serge* xvii, 50, xiii) If so, then why was the Bolshevik regime socialist? You cannot have it both ways.

Given its record, at best you can argue that Marxism is not inherently anti-democratic but that would not inspire many to raise barricades in its name. So instead we get the all-too-common excuses and contradictions rather than analysis – nor the admission that Lenin's *State and Revolution* is simply not suited to a real revolution.

The Bolsheviks

The utility of Serge is clear – he allows Trotskyists to sound libertarian by going on about workers democracy while justifying its destruction and Bolshevik authoritarianism. If this means tying yourself into contradictions, so be it. This can be seen from Weissman's book – if Serge *did* think "democracy was a defining component of socialism" and "at the heart of the socialist project" rather than an "accessory of the revolutionary process" (*Serge* xiii) why did he spill so much ink arguing the opposite?

Like all Trotskyists, for Serge the "[civil] war, the internal measures against counterevolution, and the famine" had "killed off Soviet democracy." (*Memoirs*, 155) Weissman follows him, arguing that soviet democracy "did not survive" the civil war. Yet soviet democracy was eliminated before it started in May 1918 with the packing and disbanding of soviets by the Bolsheviks when they lost popular support.¹⁸ Given this, Weissman's comment that the Bolshevik leadership had an "underdeveloped commitment" to the soviets seems, at best, an understatement. (*Serge* xiii)

Which raises an obvious question – how can the Bolsheviks be praised for recognising "the hegemony of the proletariat in the revolutionary process" while, on the very same page, admitting that "authoritarian anti-democratic practices were institutionalised" along with the Bolshevik's

¹⁷ *Property is Theft!*, 443.

¹⁸ See section H.6.1 of *An Anarchist FAQ* volume 2.

“position of monopoly power” and the became Soviets “merely auxiliary organs of the Party”? (Serge 38) And even here she gets the date wrong by arguing this happened “after 1918”¹⁹ when, in reality, it was in the spring of 1918.

Weissman argues his embrace of Bolshevism “melted away Serge’s disillusionment with the masses” (Serge 19) which had informed his individualism. Yet his new found Bolshevism was hardly any less elitist – the workers are “[b]ehind” the communists, “sympathising instinctively with the party and carrying out the menial tasks required by the revolution.” (Danger 6) If previously he saw no role for the masses in his revolution, he now saw a role for them – as groupie. After all, what is left for the masses once we accept Serge’s *Year One* formulation of the party as brain of working class other than menial tasks? (Serge 27)

What happens if the masses reject this role of supporting the party, being its unthinking hands, and take an independent role in *their* revolution? The logic of Bolshevism, expressed in Lenin’s *What is to Be Done?*, is clear – the workers can only reach a trade union consciousness (at best) and so any spontaneous movement reflects bourgeois influences.²⁰ This privileges the party and allows the rationalisation of party dictatorship – the party is the vanguard of the class, representing its “higher interests” and so class consciousness cannot help but be defined by how much the class agrees with the party. If the class opposes the party then, by definition, its consciousness has fallen and, consequently, the party has the right (no, the duty) to impose its will on it.

This can be seen from the popular Trotskyist excuse for the Bolshevik regime, namely that the working class was reduced in size and “declassed” during the civil war and so the party had no alternative but to exercise its dictatorship. However, Lenin first formulated this position “to justify a political clamp-down” in response to rising working class protest rather than its lack: “As discontent amongst workers became more and more difficult to ignore, Lenin ... began to argue that the consciousness of the working class had deteriorated ... workers had become ‘declassed.’”²¹ How do we know that they were “declassed”? They opposed the party which represented their “higher interests.” It is hard to find a more circular argument!

This means that the workers must be protected from themselves by the vanguard and so in 1920 Serge argued that a democratic regime was impossible because the militants “leading the masses ... cannot rely on the consciousness, the goodwill or the determination of those they have to deal with; for the masses who will follow them or surround them will be warped by the old regime, relatively uncultivated, often unaware, torn by feelings and instincts inherited from the past.” So “revolutionaries will have to take on the dictatorship without delay.” The experience of Russia “reveals an energetic and innovative minority which is compelled to make up for the deficiencies in the education of the backward masses by the use of compulsion.” (Danger 92, 115)

If, as he later claimed, “the outright obliteration of every trace of democracy” apparently “worried and even distressed” him at around this time you cannot see it in these works. (*Memoirs* 172) Indeed, he repeats this formulation at the end of the 1920s: “The party of the proletariat must know... how to break the resistance of the backwards elements among the masses; it must know how to stand firm sometimes against the masses”. (*Year One* 218) With such an ideology is it unsurprising that Serge (eventually) concluded that “the only problem which revolutionary Russia,

¹⁹ Serge himself points to July 1918 to when the “proletarian dictatorship is forced to throw off its democratic paraphernalia” due to the civil war. (*Year One*, 265)

²⁰ See section H.5 of *An Anarchist FAQ* volume 2.

²¹ Jonathan Aves, *Workers Against Lenin: Labour Protest and the Bolshevik Dictatorship* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 1996), 18, 90.

in all the years from 1917 to 1923, utterly failed to consider was the problem of liberty”? (quoted, *Serge* 28)

Serge reiterates that well-know paradox of Bolshevik apologetics – the party is “supported by the entire working population” yet “maintains its unique situation in dictatorial fashion.” (*Danger* 66) A cynic would ask it were so popular then the party would have had no need to destroy democracy and, unsurprisingly, Bolshevik repression tended to *decrease* when the threat of the Whites was highest (as opposition parties and workers preferred Red dictatorship to White and so sided with the regime) and *increase* once the threat disappeared (as opposition parties and workers, rightly, sought to increase their freedoms). Hence the final destruction of political liberties came after the end of the civil war.

However, Weissman is right to note that the Bolsheviks’ “immediate goal” was not “to establish a monopoly on state power” but it *was* for the party to seize state power (e.g., Lenin’s 1917 pamphlet *Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?*).²² Thus it was not the civil war which “led to their developing party power rather than soviet power” (*Serge* 29, xiv) but rather it was the goal from the start. This flows from the limited Marxist vision of democracy – representative democracy, the election of a workers’ government. However, as anarchists have been arguing since Proudhon, such a centralised democracy is no democracy at all. Rather, you need a decentralised federal system based on social and economic self-government from below upwards:

“Unless democracy is a fraud, and the sovereignty of the People a joke, it must be admitted that each citizen in the sphere of his industry, each municipal, district or provincial council within its own territory, is the only natural and legitimate representative of the Sovereign, and that therefore each locality should act directly and by itself in administering the interests which it includes, and should exercise full sovereignty in relation to them.”²³

As such, regardless of Weissman’s claims, “[a]uthentic democracy” is not just “control from below.” (*Serge* xviii)²⁴ It is important, which is why Proudhon raised the need for election and recall in 1848 as did his followers in Paris in 1871 (when it finally entered Marxism),²⁵ but so is self-government within communities and workplaces and the mandating of delegates, not representatives. Simply electing a government and then trying to “control [it] from below” will not meet the needs of genuine socialist theory nor of a social revolution – as Kropotkin continually stressed.

So while flawed from an anarchist position, from a (bourgeois) democratic perspective the Bolshevik regime was initially elected. The question is: what if the ruling party loses popular support? Will it relinquish power or create a party dictatorship? Faced with this in the spring of 1918, the Bolsheviks opted for the later option and by the time Serge arrived in early 1919 it was a truism of their ideology. He embraced this position, writing extensively in the anarchist press to justify it.

This is important. As one historian notes, the defeat of the Whites in early 1920 saw the Bolsheviks take “victory as a sign of the correctness of its ideological approach and set about the task of reconstruction on the basis of an intensification of War Communism policies with redoubled

²² See section H.3.11 of *An Anarchist FAQ* volume 2.

²³ Proudhon, *Property is Theft!*, 595.

²⁴ Weissman does not mention that Lenin considered that “the organisational principle” of Marxism is “to proceed from the top downward.” (*Collected Works* 7: 396–7) Also see section H.3.3 of *An Anarchist FAQ* volume 2.

²⁵ *Property is Theft!*, 28, 41.

determination.”²⁶ Thus Serge’s account of the Second Congress of the Comintern (*Memoirs* 125) does not, like most Leninist accounts, mention Zinoviev’s pronouncement on the necessity of party dictatorship.²⁷ This was not an aberration but rather a lesson the Bolsheviks considered as required learning for the world revolutionary movement (see Lenin’s *Left-Wing Communism* and Trotsky’s *Terrorism and Communism*, both written to influence delegates to the congress). Trotsky repeated this lesson until his death.

If, as Weissman says, Serge was impressed by the Bolsheviks’ “unity of thought and action” then we need to conclude that they thought about their anti-democratic practices and, as such, they felt there were compatible with Marxism. Indeed, leading Bolsheviks wrote significant works doing precisely that. Given this, for Weissman to state that the Bolsheviks “could see the contradiction between their democratic goals and their authoritarian methods, which they justified by the all-too-real danger of reaction” is wishful thinking. (*Serge* 38, 49) The Bolsheviks considered civil war as the inevitable result of any revolution and so there was no contradiction just the recognition of reality – the “fearsome chain of necessities” which Serge proclaimed would afflict every revolution. (*Danger*, 103)

This is the ideological context of the Kronstadt rebellion of early 1921, itself a product of a wave of industrial unrest across Russia which reached the level of a general strike in many cities and towns. These strikes, like those from 1918 onwards, were repressed and so when Weissman writes of how under Stalinism “[a]ll forms of collective resistance were broken and any residual resistance was atomised” this is equally applicable under Lenin. Serge presents a taste of this in his account of Kronstadt²⁸ and while the history of labour protest in the so-called “workers’ state” is still to be written, what we do know is that it was extensive – as was the Bolshevik repression of it.²⁹ This refutes the assertion that the “civil war had almost wiped out the working class.” (*Serge* 204, 84) True, the number of workers had decreased during this time but they were able to repeatedly take collective action in the face of significant state repression. Weissman makes no attempt to discuss these awkward facts and how the dropping away of popular support in early 1918 shaped Bolshevik ideology – specifically its undermining of soviet democracy and subsequent embrace of party dictatorship.

Serge, as it well known, sided with the party dictatorship against Kronstadt. So while he acknowledged that “Kronstadt was the beginning of a fresh, liberating revolution for popular democracy” he concluded “the Party’s duty [was] to make concessions... but not to abdicate power” as the country was too exhausted to allow soviet democracy and it would, inevitably, produce a counter-revolutionary dictatorship. (*Memoirs* 150–1) Weissman suggests that this showed he was “rooted in concrete conditions.” (*Serge* 47) Quite the reverse as it points to a blissful unawareness of the reality of the Bolshevik regime. Yes, circumstances were bad but bad policies inspired by bad politics had made the situation worse – from the moment the Bolsheviks seized power.³⁰ This downward spiral was finally arrested by the NEP (it soon gave “marvellous results” (*Memoirs* 172)), which unlike the destruction of soviet democracy and workers control was con-

²⁶ Aves, 37.

²⁷ Zinoviev announced that “the dictatorship of the proletariat is at the same time the dictatorship of the Communist Party.” (*Proceedings and Documents of the Second Congress 1920* [New York: Pathfinder, 1991] volume 1, 152).

²⁸ He recalled that “a considerable number of small strikes were now spreading in working-class suburbs” before admitting that the strike “was now almost of a general character” a few days later. (*Memoirs* 146, 152).

²⁹ See section H.6.3 of *An Anarchist FAQ* volume 2.

³⁰ See section H.6.2 of *An Anarchist FAQ* volume 2.

sidered as a “retreat” by leading Bolsheviks. Change was needed but the Bolsheviks rejected any move to genuine socialism and preferred to consolidate their monopoly position. So while introducing soviet democracy *may* have produced an anti-socialist dictatorship, Serge cannot bring himself to admit that his position meant supporting the anti-socialist dictatorship of the Bolsheviks and ensuring the continuation of a bureaucratic regime which would inevitably degenerate further.

If “economic crisis, civil war and internal counter-revolution” (*Serge* 38) are the root causes of Bolshevik authoritarianism (and so Stalinism) and if these are considered inevitable by Bolshevik ideology (as they became so) then we are left with a significant problem for Marxism. If we agree with Serge on Kronstadt then we must also conclude that the stated principles of Marxism (“full democracy”) are simply unsuitable for application during a revolution. That the Bolsheviks *did* conclude this is something their modern-day followers seek to downplay. We would all be better served if modern-day Marxists simply admitted this and stop going on about Lenin’s *State and Revolution*. Revolutionary anarchists, it should be noted, predicted all these problems and developed their ideas appropriately (as seen in Kropotkin’s *The Conquest of Bread* or *The Great French Revolution*).

Serge sows more illusions in Bolshevism by suggesting that after Kronstadt most of the Party leadership and activists hoped that with peace “some sort of Soviet democracy” would return. (*Memoirs* 155) It would be churlish to note that the civil war had ended in November 1920 with the defeat of Wrangel, that the Cheka and Red Army troops were being used to smash strikes and peasant uprisings and that Kronstadt revolt had been crushed for demanding precisely that.

The notion that the party leadership hoped to restore soviet democracy is not reflected in their writings or speeches nor can it be squared with Serge’s writings of the time. It can be dismissed as wishful thinking inspired by hindsight. Likewise, Serge’s later conclusion that the revolution dealt itself “a self-inflicted death in 1918 with the establishment of the Cheka” (quoted, *Serge* 7) is at odds with his unambiguous public comment at the time that the “success of a revolution requires the implacable severity of a Dzerhinsky”, the ruthless head of the Cheka. (*Danger*, 69) Serge’s latter recognition of reality is all fine and good, but Weissman’s attempts to portray this as anything other than hindsight is as unbecoming as it is unconvincing. Similarly, claims that for Serge Kronstadt was important because “the Party had lied; a barrier had been broken” (*Serge* 46) does not address Serge’s comments about “the strenuous calumnies put out by the Communist Party” against Makhno before he complained that “the press of the revolution” was “positively berserk with lies” during Kronstadt. (*Memoirs*, 143, 148) Nor was he not above distorting Kronstadt’s programme to defend the regime. (*Papers*, 18)

So the notion that “Serge became a Marxist because the Bolsheviks knew what to do next” (*Serge* 19) is problematic, given what it actually wanted – party power over the councils is *not* a good thing nor is a centralised “state capitalist” economic regime (in 1917 Lenin had publicly stated that socialism “is merely the next step forward from state-capitalist monopoly” (*Year One*, 222)). Weissman notes that Serge retroactively sided with Lenin against the left-communists (*Serge* 31) although fails to mention he proclaimed those arguing against state-capitalism and for workers control of production “intellectuals of middle-class origin.” (*Year One*, 225) Nor did Serge side with the Workers’ Opposition in late 1920 although Weissman, following Serge (*Memoirs* 144), proclaims that it urged “genuine freedom and authority to the trade unions, workers’ control of production and true Soviet democracy.” (*Serge* 42) In reality, it “had no wish to disturb the communist party’s monopoly of political power” and unions would continue to be controlled

through party cells.³¹ So for all his later talk of concluding the necessity of a “Communism of associations” around this time (*Memoirs* 173), he did not seek to influence his party by supporting the (limited) calls for a move in that direction. Significantly Serge does not mention that his economic alternative to the NEP was identical to the Kronstadt rebels’ vision.

Weissman wraps herself in contradiction with Serge’s “Communism of associations.” She argues that it would have been an economic recovery based on consumer and worker co-operatives “without the return of the market” but which had prices, buying and selling “and some market forms”. (*Serge* 49–50) So much for communism being the abolition of the wages system! This is unsurprising, as it is a misnomer as his vision sounds more like Proudhon’s mutualism (market socialism based on federations of co-operatives). Given this, she is right to suggest it is not a “syndicalist reprise” (*Serge* 50) but for the wrong reasons – anarchists had argued for it since Proudhon, although communist-anarchists (and, later, syndicalists) actually did reject market links between associations.

Unfortunately neither Weissman nor Serge mention his rejection of this possibility in 1918 under the catch-all of localism in the late 1920s. (*Year One* 137, 236) Yet the reality of the new centralised regime put the possible dangers of localism into perspective – the waste of resources, time and local goodwill was overwhelming, with one expert noting that centralisation simply “did not work”, the “poor achievements of the centralised economy” and its “inefficiency.”³² Kropotkin would not have been surprised – the notion that a “strongly centralised Government” could “command that a prescribed quantity” of a good “be sent to such a place on such a day” and be “received on a given day by a specified official and stored in particular warehouses” was not only “undesirable” but also “wildly Utopian.”³³

It is ironic, though, to see her complain that “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.” (*Serge* 50) She fails to note that all the Stalinists had to do was quote Lenin on workers’ control.³⁴ In terms of Marx, his “picture of life and organisation in the first stage of communism is very incomplete. There is no discussion of such obviously important developments as workers’ control. We can only guess how much power workers enjoy in their enterprises.”³⁵ While anarchists have advocated industrial democracy since Proudhon’s *What is Property?*³⁶, Marxists inherited the call by Marx and Engels “to centralise all instruments of production in the hands of the State” and “industrial armies, especially for agriculture.”³⁷ Trotsky’s militarisation of labour (as theoretically defended in his infamous 1920 book *Terrorism and Communism*) can hardly be blamed on Stalinism.

³¹ Leonard Schapiro, *The Origin of the Communist Autocracy: Political Opposition in the Soviet State: The First Phase, 1917–1922* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1965), 294.

³² Silvana Malle, *The Economic Organization of War Communism 1918–1921* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1985) 275, 281.

³³ *The Conquest of Bread* (Catania: Elephant Editions, 1985), 82–3.

³⁴ See Maurice Brinton’s “The Bolsheviks’ and Workers’ Control: The State and Counter-Revolution” (David Goodway (Ed.), *For Workers’ Power: The Selected Writings of Maurice Brinton* (Edinburgh/Oakland: AK Press, 2004) for an extensively documented account of the clear links between Lenin and Stalin.

³⁵ Bertell Ollman, “Marx’s “Marx’s Vision of Communism”, *Social and Sexual Revolution: Essays on Marx and Reich* (Montreal, Black Rose: 1978), 65–6. This is significant, as a Marxist Ollman trawls all of Marx’s works to present his vision of communism – if such an advocacy existed then he would have reported it.

³⁶ *Property is Theft!*, 119. Also see the introduction (10–13).

³⁷ “Manifesto of the Communist Party”, *The Marx-Engels Reader* (London & New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1978), Robert C. Tucker (Ed.), 490.

Thus the “intensification of War Communism labour policies” happened “in early 1920 [when] the Communist Party leadership was no longer distracted by the Civil War from concentrating its thoughts and efforts on the formulation and implementation of its labour policies.” The “experience of the Civil War was one factor predisposing communists towards applying military methods” to the economy in early 1920 but “ideological considerations were also important.”³⁸

So ideology played its part, something Trotskyists do not like to admit so the contradictions required to defend the twists and turns of the party pile up. Thus Serge proclaims that the civil war stopped the regime entering “on the socialist organisation of production and administration, which in the end it only managed by 1921, after the introduction of the New Economic Policy” while that policy was also “the retreat of the proletariat before the rural petty bourgeois.” (*Year One*, 227, 374) Later he suggests that he recognised that “War Communism” was a temporary measure imposed by necessity (*Memoirs* 135) but in the late 1920s he argued it was “converting socialism *into reality*” and was “considered the beginnings of the socialist order whose completion the international revolution would render possible.” It was “inaccurately” called war communism because it was “also an ambitious attempt to organise socialist production” based on the Bolshevik’s “intense theoretical clarity and their skill in political manoeuvre” which “never thought simply of using expedients necessitated by war, valid only for a time of war: they thought of building towards the future, of starting a sweeping fulfilment of their socialist programme.” Civil war simply “compelled them to get on with the job faster.” (*Year One*, 374, 359–60)

So if by the late 1930s “Serge saw industrial democracy as indispensable to the collectivisation of production” (*Serge* 275) this was not the case under Lenin and that it took him so long to reach this truism of social anarchism is significant as it shows how far he actually was from the mainstream of the movement before the First World War. Nor is there discussion why the Bolsheviks rejected this possibility in favour of the state-managed capitalism (in 1918 and in 1921 with the NEP) – undoubtedly because economic freedom and democracy would have raised expectations of political freedom and democracy, the one thing the Bolsheviks would *never* agree to.

Given all this it hardly enough to be, like Serge, “privately critical” of the degeneration of the revolution. After all, how could it be “bitter farce” if “subsequent revolutions imitated the Bolshevik experience” when the leading Bolsheviks and Serge himself were arguing that revolutionaries across the globe had no choice but to follow it right down to the necessity of party dictatorship? (*Serge* 20, 38) Anarchist Gaston Leval was quite right to publish Serge’s private and public pronouncements side-by-side, proclaiming the latter “conscious lies.”³⁹

Ultimately, should we be surprised by how the Bolshevik revolution turned out? In a revealing passage, Serge recounts how he met a Bolshevik in a French prison who “advocated a merciless dictatorship, suppression of press freedom, authoritarian revolution, and education on Marxist lines.” (*Memoirs* 74) This, significantly, was before the Russian Civil War started in May 1918. Can we not conclude that Bolshevik ideology and the centralised structures it favoured played its role in how quickly the revolution degenerated in the face of the inevitable? This can be seen from the Left Opposition and its politics yet some force themselves to believe the rhetoric of the summer of 1917 than the grim reality of Bolshevism before or after...

³⁸ Aves, 17, 11.

³⁹ Daniel Guérin, *Anarchism: From Theory to Practice* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970), 97. Weissman buries this in an endnote (*Serge* 284), referencing Sedgwick’s quoting of Guérin in his “Unhappy Elitist”!

The Opposition

It is to Serge's credit that he was an early Oppositionist and no one would dispute his bravery in resisting Stalinist repression while in Russia nor raising his voice when exiled. However, this should not mean we cannot criticise the politics of the Opposition and how Weissman and Serge portray it. It simply not true to suggest that Serge's "preoccupation with the masses, with democracy, with the question of freedom, was shared by other Left Oppositionists, particularly Trotsky" (*Serge* 20) – particularly when your own book refutes it such claims. The fact that most Oppositionists returned to the fold after Stalin announced the first five-year plan shows how limited this "preoccupation" actually was.

Contrasting Serge to Trotsky in the 1920s, Weissman notes Serge "consistently defended broad democratic rights both inside and outside the Party." This is simply not true – as she admitted earlier, even Serge "had not advocated such board democratic ideas in 1927." Worse, after admitting that the Left Opposition "had much to say about inner-Party democracy in the 1920s" but not democracy outwith it she then, *on the very same page*, writes of how its "programme had featured working-class democracy"! (*Serge* 119, 98, 119) Its programme, it should be stressed, proclaimed "the Leninist principle, inviolable for every Bolshevik, that the dictatorship of the proletariat is and can be realised only through the dictatorship of the party" and "its very core [requires] a single proletarian party."⁴⁰

Significantly, her summary of the *Platform of the Opposition* fails to mention this but talks of "restoration of the Soviets", the "revitalisation of the trade unions and the Party." She asserts that Serge's 1929 "programme of reform" fails to mention soviet democracy and notes its "call for a return to democracy within the Party, not society at large" but explains this "in order to demonstrate the Opposition's loyalty to the Party." (*Serge* 94–5, 123) This ignores the awkward fact that this principle had been Bolshevik orthodoxy since late 1918 and so had nothing to with placating the Stalinists. Simply put, if the Left Opposition acted "in the name of the democratic ideals expressed at the beginning of the revolution" (*Serge* 237) this was not reflected in its Platform nor Serge's own works in the 1920s.

The Opposition points to another contradiction in Serge's Trotskyism which Weissman does not explore. For all his talk of party democracy, Weissman quotes him arguing that, by 1921, the Bolsheviks had become "a mass Party of backward workers led by parvenu bureaucrats" and (later) that it was "non-Party workers... joining the Party... who assured the victory of its bureaucracy." How much democracy can be granted if you consider the rank and file as "already very backward"? As with Lenin and Trotsky, he was left with the internal dictatorship of the "cadres of the active militants." (quoted, *Serge* 82, 83) Presumably, if the Left Opposition *had* succeeded then its first act would have been a purge of the party and so an actual reduction in the numbers allowed democracy?

Would this have worked? Serge's *Memoirs* suggest not for when Lenin "proclaimed a purge of the Party, aimed at those revolutionaries who had come in from other parties – i.e. those who were not saturated with the Bolshevik mentality" it "meant the establishment within the Party of a dictatorship of the old Bolsheviks, and the direction of disciplinary measures, not against the unprincipled careerists and conformist late-comers, but against those sections with a critical outlook." (*Memoirs* 157–8)

⁴⁰ *The Challenge of the Left Opposition (1926–7)* (New York: Pathfinder, 1980) 395, 441

Thus the very reasons why party dictatorship was favoured by the Bolsheviks inevitably means restricting party democracy. Yet the centralised dictatorship of an elite needs a bureaucracy to function but it is the functionaries who quickly gain *real* power. Unsurprisingly, the Bolsheviks did not have the theoretical richness to understand the links between centralisation and bureaucracy which marked the Bolshevik regime from the start.⁴¹

The Opposition did not really understand what went wrong, seeking to recreate the party dictatorship while hoping, somehow, to avoid its inevitable outcome. Yes, Trotsky did call for “a multi-Party system” in 1936 but a year later he was back to the “revolutionary dictatorship of a proletarian party” being “an objective necessity” because “capitalism does not permit the material and the moral development of the masses.”⁴² Trotsky returned to this in 1939, arguing that only the party “is capable of overcoming the vacillation of the masses themselves” and “if the dictatorship of the proletariat means anything at all, then it means that the vanguard of the proletariat is armed with the resources of the state in order to repel dangers, including those emanating from the backward layers of the proletariat itself.”⁴³ Although Weissman refers to this article (*Serge* 98, 225), she fails to mention this aspect of Trotsky’s polemic against Serge and what it means for her claims of Bolshevik support for workers’ democracy – everyone is “backward” compared to the vanguard! Serge, as noted above, was not shy in pointing this out throughout the 1920s

Simply put the “bureaucracy” had not “usurped power from the working class”, the Bolshevik party had done that long before. So while Weissman is right to note that it “necessary for an entire generation [of party members] to be eliminated” under Stalinism (*Serge* 8, 204) the fact remains that this was simply removing *personnel*. There was no need to change the nature nor social relationships of the regime by replacing soviet democracy with party dictatorship nor workers’ self-management in production with one-management as Lenin and Trotsky had done that.

Thus the Opposition was no alternative, rooted as it was to the Bolshevik tradition it proudly proclaimed itself true the heir. Thus we find Trotsky in 1923 proclaiming that “[i]f there is one question which basically not only does not require revision but does not so much as admit the thought of revision, it is the question of the dictatorship of the Party.”⁴⁴ That Serge at least came to recognise the contradiction at the heart of Bolshevism is to his credit – albeit 20 years too late – but the same cannot be said of Trotsky or his followers, who subjected Serge to the indignity of referring his own Leninist works against him⁴⁵ in response to his argument that “fear of liberty, which is the fear of the masses, marks almost the entire course of the Russian Revolution. If it is

⁴¹ Bureaucracy afflicted the Bolshevik regime from the start for “in the soviets and in economic management the embryo of centralised and bureaucratic state forms had already emerged by mid-1918.” In Moscow, by August 1918, state officials comprised 30% of the workforce. For the Bolsheviks “the development of a bureaucracy” was a puzzle, “whose emergence and properties mystified them” while Lenin “had argued that centralisation was the only way to combat bureaucratism.” (Richard Sakwa, *Soviet Communists in Power: a study of Moscow during the Civil War, 1918–21* [Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987], pp. 96–7, 191, 182, 196)

⁴² *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1936–37* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1978), 513–4. Weissman later qualifies this by noting “it was not until the second half of the 1930s that Trotsky wrote of political pluralism and a multi-party system in the USSR. (*Serge* 119)

⁴³ “The Moralists and Sycophants against Marxism,” *Their Morals and Ours* (New York: Pathfinder, 1973), 59.

⁴⁴ *Leon Trotsky Speaks* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1972), 158.

⁴⁵ The editors of a Trotskyist journal pointed its readers to Serge’s own *Year One of the Russian Revolution* in 1938 when he suggested that the Bolshevik leaders had made some “serious mistakes from the beginning of the revolution.” They suggested that his earlier work refuted his own “reflections of a recent date” and “need rereading, not rewriting.” (“Exchange of Views on Kronstadt”, Lenin and Trotsky, *Kronstadt* [New York: Pathfinder Press, 1986], 140–1)

possible to discover a major lesson, capable of revitalising Marxism ... one might formulate it in these terms: Socialism is essentially democratic – the word, ‘democratic’, being used here in its libertarian sense.” (*Papers* 181)

Any libertarian arguing against a Trotskyist today would more likely than not have Serge quoted at him (particularly with regards to Kronstadt) which shows the limitations in using him as an exemplar for a revitalised Marxism. Particularly since revolutionary anarchists did not take until the late 1930s to recognise the problems.

The Alternative

So the Opposition was no alternative, simply seeking to remain true to the Bolshevik tradition of party dictatorship. That the problem lay with the underlying ideology only started to dawn with Serge in the late 1930s and, to his credit, started to draw most of the conclusions revolutionary anarchists had been arguing for since the 1860s.

It is to other visitors to revolutionary Russia that we need to turn to for understanding of what went wrong and a genuine alternative, namely Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman. Weissman repeats Serge’s comments that Zinoviev offered them the chance to tour Russia after Kronstadt in order to “understand” (*Serge* 44) the Bolsheviks’ actions, ignoring the awkward fact that they had already done so and that it was this encounter with the reality rather than the rhetoric of Bolshevism which informed their break with it.

Compared to Serge’s *Memoirs*, Goldman’s *My Disillusionment in Russia* is by far the better work to learn lessons from the Russian Revolution. It drew the same conclusions as Serge over a decade before him and without any illusions on the nature of the Bolshevik regime under Lenin. That “Serge continued to grapple with the difficult theoretical problems caused by the continuing evolution of Soviet society” (*Serge* 203) says far more about the theoretical limitations of Marxism than Serge. Goldman had no such trouble recognising it was “State Capitalism” (247), nor did the Russian anarchists who drew that obvious conclusion in 1918.

Goldman, like all revolutionary anarchists, did not think an anarchist society would appear overnight.⁴⁶ She had not come to Russia expecting “Anarchism realised” nor for it “to follow in the immediate footsteps of centuries of despotism and submission.” Rather, she hoped “to find in Russia at least the beginnings of the social changes for which the Revolution had been fought.” (xlvii) Instead she found a regime which was going away from that and creating a new class system. After much soul-searching she concluded that the workers of the world had to know the truth in order to avoid the mistakes made – and for which she was slandered as a liar and agent of the bourgeoisie just as Serge was in the 1930s by the Stalinists.

Like Serge, Goldman admitted “the failure” of the Russian anarchists but unlike him recognised this “does by no means argue the defeat of the libertarian idea.” (252) Goldman, unlike Serge, was not an elitist individualist but a pro-syndicalist communist-anarchist and, as such, had the theoretical basis to learn the *real* lessons of the Russian Revolution – that the masses, through their class organs of soviets, unions and co-operatives, had to manage their own revolution rather than “supervise” a party ruling in its name.

⁴⁶ See section H.2.5 of *An Anarchist FAQ* volume 2.

Conclusions

The tragedy of Serge is simply that due to his elitist background he failed to side with the working class, instead joining a new elite before, decades too late, recognising his errors and coming close to the communist-anarchist ideas he had never embraced while in our movement.

We can agree with Weissman that “[d]emocracy must mean democracy at work and in the economy as a whole; liberty must mean personal and political freedom” simply because anarchists have recognised this since Proudhon wrote *What is Property?*. However, attempts to link this to Bolshevism are unconvincing and so Weissman’s own book presents enough evidence to refute her own wishful thinking on both the Bolshevik regime and the Left Opposition. We need to look elsewhere, particularly given Bolshevik “ignorance of democratic values.” (*Serge* xviii, xvii)

Serge does have some lessons for us, but not the ones Weissman seeks. Ultimately, if it is a case that “for Serge the essential issue was that of democratic self-organisation versus totalitarian control” then why was the Bolshevik regime to be supported given that “Serge was distressed that democracy had been obliterated”? Is party dictatorship acceptable if the right people are in charge? If so, how do you square this with working class self-liberation or the “notion that thoughts must be filtered through the Party smacks of elitism and distrust of the ability of the ordinary workers to judge which policies were correct”? (*Serge* 274, 49, 98) Is democracy “integral” to Marxism or not? If so, why was the Bolshevik regime socialist? Its history shows that it is, at best, optional to that ideology.

Given Serge’s willingness to defend the necessity of party dictatorship, his refusal to support genuine soviet democracy throughout the 1920s, his unwillingness to rethink his position on Kronstadt, how can Weissman proclaim that he “never compromised his commitment to the creation of a society which defends human freedom”? If Serge feared a “dark future” where the economy is “subject not to democratic control of workers and their organisations but run by technocrats and totalitarians who strangle democracy, even as they organise production ever more efficiently” when how can we square this with his previous defence of Lenin’s advocacy of “dictatorial” one-man management in the interests of efficiency? (*Serge* xi, xvi-xvii) That Lenin’s policy, like so many others, contributed to economic inefficiency is never acknowledged.

Weissman, like Serge, does not address the real contradiction of their position – if Marxism is genuinely based on liberty, democracy, workers’ self-management of production, and so forth then why is the Bolshevik regime considered socialist and worth defending? If it is socialist, then why was the Stalinist regime not? True, Lenin’s regime was not as brutal as Stalin’s but that focuses attention away from the social relationships of the system and onto the personalities of leaders. In short, the USSR “represented a new, negative force in the world” (*Serge* xvi) long before Stalin consolidated his power – as can be seen from the legacy of creating Bolshevik-style parties across the world to reproduce the “success” of the revolution in Russia.

And perhaps that is the key – many socialists need to redefine their definition of success. If you consider a party dictatorship presiding over a state-capitalist economy as “success” then you really need a better understanding of what socialism is. Serge, to his credit, finally had such an understanding by the late 1930s – two decades after those with the revolutionary anarchist politics he had rejected in favour of elitist-individualism. Unfortunately, his earlier works expounding the Bolshevik Myth are in contradiction to his later clarity of analysis and are another barrier to overcome in order to gain a genuine (libertarian) socialist perspective.

The lessons are clear – if anarchists are not well organised and take an active part in the class struggle then they will be overtaken by events. This is hardly new – Kropotkin argued this in French in the 1880s and in Russian in the 1900s – but it is important to reiterate for the current generation of libertarian activists. Let Serge be a warning to all libertarians and let us seek to learn from rather than, like the Trotskyists, rationalise, justify and so inevitably repeat the mistakes of the past.

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