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Victor Serge & the Bolsheviks

Andrew Flood

1998

From the Summer of 1918 the Bolshevik government undertook the destruction of the Russian Revolution, the destroyed all the gains the workers had won in October over the next four years. Any anarchist who has argued this with Leninists today will know the name of Victor Serge.

The material Serge wrote in his first years in Russia consists of crude apologies for the Bolshevik dictatorship. It is not surprising that this is the most popular material among today's Leninists. But in his later writings the Bolsheviks pet anarchist turns to bite his master. With the illusion of the 'success' of the Russian Revolution fading in the late 1930's Serge rediscovered the brutality of the Bolshevik regime.

Serge was not at the time of the revolution an anarchist. He had been an anarchist in the years before the first world war but joined the Bolsheviks on his arrival in Russia in 1919. Like the Bolsheviks he argued for the party dictatorship saying "The Party lived in the certain knowledge that the slightest relaxation of its authority would give the day to reaction"

Even when the Party lied to its own members and massacred the sailors of Kronstadt he stuck with the Party, despite being only

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too aware of its lies. He describes how he was initially fooled into believing that Kronstadt was a White rising but how “The truth seeped through little by little, past the smoke screen put out by the Party press, which was positively bezerk with lies...it lied systematically”

In later years when Trotsky lied about the reason for the suppression Serge answered that “It is untrue that the sailors of Kronstadt demanded privileges..”. When Trotsky claimed they sought the restoration of capitalism, Serge pointed out “The economic program of Kronstadt was so legitimate, so far in reality from being counter-revolutionary, and so easy to grant, that in the very hours when the last of the mutineers were being shot, Lenin implement the same demands by getting the New Economic Policy adopted”. When Trotsky denied the massacres carried out after the rebellion Serge wrote “By hundreds, if not by thousands the sailors were shot on the spot. Three months later they were still being taken out by night..in small batches, to be executed in the cellars or the exercise yards”

Serge described what Kronstadt actually stood for as follows “Pamphlets distributed in the working class districts (of Petrograd) put out the demands of the Kronstadt Soviet. It was a programme for the renewal of the revolution. I will summarise it: re-election of the Soviets by secret ballot; freedom of the spoken and printed word for all revolutionary parties and groupings; the release of revolutionary political prisoners; abolition of official propaganda; an end to requisitioning in the countryside; freedom for the artisan class; immediate suppression of the barrier squads that were stopping the people getting their food as they pleased”

He also describes how these demands were received by the Bolsheviks “from the first moment, at a time when it was easy to mitigate the conflict the Bolshevik leaders had no intention of using anything but forcible methods. Later, we discovered that the whole of the delegation sent by Kronstadt to explain the issues to the Petrograd Soviet and people was in the prisons of the Cheka”

While Leninists today like the SWP try to label the Kronstadt’s rising as anti-Semitic, Serge shows us the real motivation of the rebellion when he describes its final moments “The final assault was unleashed on 17 March...Some of the rebels managed to reach Finland. Others put up a furious resistance, fort to fort and street to street; they stood and were shot crying ‘Long live the world revolution!’ There were some of them who died shouting ‘Long live the Communist International!’”

These descriptions by Serge, a Bolshevik, confirm the accounts given by all the anarchists . Of course Serge had fallen for the Russian myth, that this repression would somehow preserve the revolution. Today we see it led to 70 years of a monstrous police state that completely discredited the idea of communism . So when Serge asks “Given the dictatorship of the proletariat, exercised by the Communist Party, was it right for us to use forcible repression against the protests, demands, propositions and demonstrations of workers stricken by famine?...Was it right to repress movements whose underlying origins were in working class democracy” our answer should be a very loud NO!