

The Bolsheviks' pet anarchist

The Life, Times & Confessions of Victor Serge

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Leninists are fond of quoting from the writing of Victor Serge, as a means of getting a libertarian rubber stamp for the actions of the Bolsheviks during the October revolution and the subsequent events. In his keynote article “In defence of October”¹ John Rees uses no less than 8 quotes from Serge’s writings within the space of 70 pages. Poor old Lenin only managed to clock up 4 original quotes, while Tony Cliff’s dubious interpretation of all these events manages to get more quotes in than one could possibly count. To a certain extent, what the Leninists of today are trying to tell us is that Serge was a practical man, and he knew that the only way for the revolution to succeed was to row in behind the Bolsheviks. So, with this in mind, we take a look at Serge’s autobiography “Memoirs of a Revolutionary”.

Serge was born in 1890 and rapidly became a self educator and socialist joining the Jeuns-Grades — a Belgium federation of Socialist youth groups. Serge eventually ended up in Paris, which was the scene of a huge demonstration (over 500,000 people) when the working class learned of the execution of Francisco Ferrer². “It was a time of pot-bellied peace; the atmosphere was strangely electric, the calm before the storm of 1914.”³ Serge was at this time involved in publishing a journal in Paris. Subsequent to the riots at the time of the demonstrations his house was raided, the police found weapons there, two of his comrades were sentenced to death by the guillotine, and he got 5 years in prison. Nasty times to be living in if the state considered you to be a revolutionary. But they were about to get worse. While in prison, the Great War broke out in all its futility, all over Europe sending young men to their deaths. Most of the mainstream left parties turned towards fratricidal patriotism causing mass confusion in the movement. The young imprisoned Serge found the whole situation incomprehensible.

Dawn and Decline

Following his release, Serge ended up in Petrograd at the start of 1919. He was not the only young revolutionary to be drawn to Mother Russia during her famous date with destiny. One of the first people he met while there was Maxim Gorky. Gorky, apart from being famous both at home and abroad as a major writer, was also a respected political figure in Russia. He’d been a champion of change for a long time, and his opinion was one that was respected by many.

Gorky had witnessed the early days of the revolution and reported that the Bolsheviks were “drunk with authority”⁴. But, after a brief time, Serge made his own mind up about the whole matter. “I was neither against the Bolsheviks nor neutral; I was with them, albeit independently, without renouncing thought or critical sense. Certainly on several essential points they were mistaken: in their intolerance, in their faith in stratification, in their leaning towards centralism and administrative techniques”⁵. In spite of these reservations he threw himself into working alongside the Bolsheviks. He was invited to be a Petrograd representative at the founding meeting of the Communist International (Third International) initiated by Lenin in Moscow.

¹ In “International Socialism No. 52” a journal published by the Socialist Workers Party in Britain

² Memoirs of a Revolutionary by Victor Serge

³ An anarcho-syndicalist and educational reformer. In Barcelona he translated French Syndicalist material and founded the journal Solidaridad Obrera. He was vilified and hated by the Catholic Church and the right because he established libertarian schools for the education of working class children. His respect within the working class was such that his death in Spain brought half a million people out to demonstrate on the streets of Paris.

⁴ Memoirs of a Revolutionary, page 73, Quote attributed to Maxim Gorky

⁵ *ibid* page 76

All this work for the Party brought with it special rations. Such was the wide sweeping famine in Russia at the time that, even with these rations, Serge wrote “I would have died of hunger without the sordid manipulations of the black market, where we traded the petty possessions we had brought in from France.”⁶ The Central Committee, however, suffered none of these hardships. Living in the Hotel Astoria, they dined on soup and “delicious horsemeat”⁷ in comparative warmth, overlooking the dark public squares. Serge even calls this place the “hotel of the dictators”.⁸

The Winter of 1919 was a cold and bitter one. Civil War raged, exiled Russian Aristocrats traded currency with the Tsar still on it, while the Bolsheviks printed it like it was going out of fashion and used it to procure arms. That’s right, the Bolsheviks printed money with the Tsar’s image on it. As Serge says “we used to print them for the poor fools (Russian Exiles)”⁹. The widespread cloak of hunger hung over the whole country. In the midst of this mess, the infamous Bolshevik secret police, the Chekas carried out their dastardly work. The telephone rapidly became an enemy of any sympathetic official and Serge was no exception. He writes “At every hour it brought me voices of panic-stricken women who spoke of arrests, imminent executions, and injustice, and begged me to intervene at once, for the love of God!”¹⁰. At this stage the custom of arresting and executing hostages had become “generalised and legal.”¹¹

The mere existence of a secret police is a rapid insight into the nature of the Party’s politics at the time. From 1918 onwards the leadership, from Lenin downwards, had become increasingly more paranoid and saw plots and treachery everywhere. The Cheka were formed to counteract this but as Serge writes he believed it “was one of the gravest and most impermissible errors that the Bolshevik leaders committed in 1918.”¹² He claimed that revolutionary tribunals, letting in defensive evidence and functioning in the clear light of day rather than the cloak of the night, would have functioned efficiently with “far less abuse and depravity.”¹³ When Serge brought up Zinoviev (Lenin’s appointed President of the Third International and member of the Politbureau) around this time in a conversation with Gorky, Gorky shouted out “Don’t talk to me of that beast ever again — tell him that his torturers are a disgrace to the human image.”¹⁴

By early 1920, it appeared that the Civil War was coming to an end, and the idea of normality returning to Mother Russia was gaining popularity. By January of 1920 Dzerzhinsky (People’s Commissar for the Interior), with the backing of Lenin and Trotsky, recommended the abolition of the death sentence — except in areas where there were still military operations being carried out. Hope sprang up immediately amongst the thousands of suspects in the crammed prisons as the decree was passed by the Government and signed by Lenin. But the executioners of the Cheka were busy that night, as 200 people were driven outside of Petrograd and shot. Over 300 in Moscow. Relatives scraped at the mass burial grounds looking for relics of their dead loved ones. Serge actually met one of the grim reapers who worked in the Petrograd Cheka, who said of that time “We thought that if the People’s Commissars were getting converted to Humanitarianism, that was their business. Our business was to crush the counter-revolution for ever, and they could

⁶ ibid page 79

⁷ ibid page 79

⁸ ibid page 79

⁹ ibid page 86

¹⁰ ibid page 80

¹¹ ibid page 80

¹² ibid page 80–81

¹³ ibid page 81

¹⁴ ibid page 82

shoot us afterwards if they like!”¹⁵ The work of the Cheka, although well recognised, was never spoken of. No one was disciplined for this slaughter, implying that their dirty work met with the approval of the Bolsheviks.

The enemies within?

By 1920 opinions were rampant and divided about the Soviets. The Mensheviks were outright opponents, the Left Social-Revolutionaries first boycotted them and then collaborated with them. The anarchists were divided into pro-soviet and anti-soviet. Serge called all the people outside the party view of the time “dissidents of the revolution” who were “right on many points”.¹⁶ But the dissidents had a fundamental point which had to be admitted, which was above all the right of the people of Russia “for freedom of expression and the restoration of liberty in the soviets.”¹⁷ The Soviets of 1917 had been the workers’ councils which had been composed of the workers and soldiers’ delegates who wished to disband the bad old society and bring about the dawn of a new age of freedom for mankind. But with the suppression of all opposition to the viewpoints of the Bolsheviks, Serge writes “In practice they (the soviets) represented nothing but the local Party Committees.”¹⁸ The Party at this time had been practically invaded, according to Serge, by careerists, mercenary elements who came over in swarms to the side with power. Bureaucratisation was rampant. It comes as no surprise that the Party that would bring about the “dictatorship of the proletariat” was now full of little dictators who “possessed no initiative”.¹⁹ After all, the nature of their politics was to have a small number of people making decisions for the majority.

The search for the enemies within was growing, mainly driven from the top (secretaries) downwards through the Party and exercised by the Cheka. Of the many anarchists in prison at this time, Lenin said they “were not true anarchists nor idealists — just bandits” and anyway “The State is a machine for which we are answerable and we cannot allow its operation to be frustrated.”²⁰ By this stage, the Bolsheviks were determined that this revolution was theirs alone and anyone who held an alternative opinion was labeled against the party — and therefore against the revolution. Any opposition to the will of the party was seen as a threat as the Bolsheviks wrestled for a grip on the monopoly of power. They were hanging onto it by their fingertips and any threat was dealt with in a severe manner. As one party member wrote in an official trade union journal at the time ‘Professional’ny Vestnik’ “the destruction of newspapers, the annihilation of freedom of agitation for the socialist and democratic parties is inadmissible. The....violence against strikers, etc. irritated open wounds. There has been too much of this type of memory of the Russian toiling masses and this can lead to an analogy deadly to the Soviet power.”²¹ The Bolsheviks were holding onto State power irrespective of costs, ideals or lives.

¹⁵ *ibid* page 99, Quote attributed to a man called Leonidov — his real name was never written by Serge — a man who took part in the execution of hundreds of people outside Petrograd.

¹⁶ *ibid* page 118

¹⁷ *ibid* page 119

¹⁸ *ibid* page 118

¹⁹ *ibid* page 118

²⁰ Anarchists behind bars (Summer 1921) — Lenin quoted when asked about imprisoned anarchists like Voline

²¹ The Bolsheviks & Workers Control, page 28, Quote from Party member Lovosky

Anarchists were arrested en masse by the Cheka in November 1920, as they prepared for their congress. Serge speaks, at this time, of being horrified at witnessing the rigging of elections so that Lenin's and Zinoviev's 'majority' opinion would win. Lenin said the trade unions should organise autonomously from the state (an improvement from Trotsky's position which said they should be merged) but they must be subordinate to the Party. 'All power to the Party' would have been a much more accurate slogan at this time. Incidents happened all the time in factories. The Party was becoming less and less popular, and strikes were on the increase. This was in the November and December of 1920. The atmosphere was building towards a confrontation between the Party and those who were pro-revolution, but not pro the Bolshevik version they were being served. That confrontation would burst into the open at Kronstadt and Serge was one of the witnesses.

Whose Revolution is this?

Kropotkin, the best known anarchist in Russia and worldwide at the time, died. The anarchists, including a number who were temporarily released from Bolshevik jails in order to attend, turned his funeral into a massive show of strength and a "denunciation of all tyranny"²². Behind the coffin marched thousands of mourners hand in hand, carrying the black flags of anarchism. The Cheka's presence at the funeral added to the atmosphere of tension. Many anarchists were arrested straight after the burial of the old man, only to disappear to prisons from which they would never re-emerge. Just as the old man lay in the ground, many were to join him and with them went the hopes for socialism and freedom.

18 days later, Serge was awoken in the Astoria Hotel with the news that "Kronstadt is in the hands of the Whites."²³ Later on the next day other comrades told him "the sailors have mutinied"²⁴ and that what he'd heard previously was nothing but an atrocious lie. Serge writes "We were paralysed by official falsehoods. It had never happened before that our Party should lie to us like this."²⁵ It was in fact a naval revolt, led by the local Soviet.

The battle lines were drawn, this was a battle for power. Who was really in charge of the Soviets, the people themselves or a Party already rampant with bureaucrats and careerists? Lenin had written in 1918 that "The irrefutable experience of history has shown that....the dictatorship of individual persons was very often the vehicle, the channel of the dictatorship of the revolutionary classes."²⁶ What this meant in reality was that the make-up of the Soviets had to change and was changed from the freely elected delegates to submissive party hacks who rubber stamped the decisions made further up the hierarchy. The battle at Kronstadt was fought to either bring the revolution back towards the people or to wave good-bye to it all.

²² *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, *ibid* page 121

²³ *ibid* page 124

²⁴ *ibid* page 125

²⁵ *ibid* page 125

²⁶ Lenin's article 'The immediate Tasks of the Soviet Government' published in *Isvestiya*

The killing of hope in Kronstadt

Serge wrote of the demands of the Kronstadt rebels. “Pamphlets distributed in the working class areas ... It was a programme for the renewal of the Revolution ... re-election of the Soviets by secret ballot; freedom of the spoken and printed word for all revolutionary parties and groupings; freedom for the trade unions; 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 from getting their food as they pleased.”²⁷ The crews of the First and Second Naval Squadrons, along with the garrison and the Soviet in Kronstadt, were fighting for the triumph of the above demands.

A delegation from Kronstadt which was dispatched to Petrograd to explain the uprising ended up in the hands of the Cheka. Most of those who mediated on the sailors’ behalf ended up being arrested. Serge justifies the whole incident and his own siding with the Party in this way “Kronstadt had right on its side. Kronstadt was the beginning of a fresh liberating revolution for popular democracy ... However, the country was absolutely exhausted, and production practically at a standstill; there were no reserves of any kind, not even reserves of stamina in the hearts of the masses...Soviet democracy lacked leadership, institutions and inspiration; at its back there were only masses of starving and desperate men.”²⁸ That was his reason. He saw no hope for the people to take the de-railed revolution and put it back on track. Serge puts it more bluntly in his propaganda of the time when he wrote “Despite its mistakes and abuses the Bolshevik Party is at present the supremely organised, intelligent and stable force which deserves our confidence. The Revolution has no other mainstay, and is no longer capable of any thorough going regeneration.”²⁹ It was with these words that Serge kissed the idea of freedom good-bye, and held up his arms in a shrug which said there was nothing better.

The anarchists and the Menshevik Social Democrats were outlawed, along with anybody else who didn’t give absolute loyalty to Lenin’s dictatorship. Charged with all sorts of “odious terms”³⁰, Serge himself writes “The Cheka is mad!”³¹ In Moscow at the same time Lenin was proclaiming the “New Economic Policy”. Lenin, in his own written words, described this: “Socialism is merely the next step forward from State capitalist monopoly. Or in other words, socialism is merely state capitalist monopoly which is made to serve the interests of the whole people and has to that extent ceased to be capitalist monopoly.”³² At the same congress, a party faction known as the Workers’ Opposition was outlawed and denounced as “anarcho-syndicalist” because they wished management of production to be handed over to the trade unions. This history of events displays that the Bolsheviks could not accept any threat to their monopoly of power. The threat at that time was on the cold winds of change blowing from the port of Kronstadt.

²⁷ *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, *ibid* page 126

²⁸ *ibid* page 128

²⁹ *ibid* page 129

³⁰ *ibid* page 129

³¹ *ibid* page 129

³² Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol 25, page 358

Do not mourn — Organise!

Serge has been championed for a long time by various Trotskyists and Leninists as the former Libertarian who saw the Bolshevik example and followed it. He was a practical man, they'll say, an example of an anarchist who saw sense in that time of revolt. Read his book and listen to his story. He was a man who was courageous and strong and fought for what he believed. But at one point a light was extinguished in him, and he just kept on pushing for the programme being put forth by the party. That light that went out was his belief that you could win freedom, he thought that what the working class had to do was trust in and obey the 'revolutionary party'. Unfortunately, when they did that they were left in a position of hoping the party would deliver that freedom. Too late did they realise that the emancipation of the working class is the job of the working class itself, the party isn't going to deliver it.

This battle was lost in Kronstadt, and that's why anarchists throughout the world celebrated when we saw those joyous faces on the other side as the Berlin wall was smacked over. Then the Party had won the battle and formed in its wake a viciously authoritarian state — where the will of the people was crushed beneath the wheels of interest of the Bolsheviks. So we did not mourn the passing of the Bolshevik dictatorship, socialism's chance in Russia passed when the blood of the sailors was spilled by the Red Army on the ice of Kronstadt. Serge wrote his *Memoirs of a Revolutionary* — and in it he displays how the means determine the end. Leninists have failed to make a revolution based on freedom and equality because it cannot be built on suppression. Bakunin wrote with a clarity that Serge only found out through experience "Only the practice of social revolution, great new historical experiences, the logic of events can bring them around, sooner or later, to a common solution: and strong in our belief in the validity of our principle.....the workers..., not their leaders, will then end by joining with us to tear down these prisons called States and to condemn politics, which is in fact nothing more than the art of dominating and fleecing the masses."³³ It's imperative that a social revolution is built on freedom, as any anarchist will tell you. When it is, that revolution will not fail, and that is a truth that we are here to build for.

³³ No Gods, No Masters: Vol. 2, ed Daniel Guerin, page 161 — Bakunin letter to La Liberte Oct 5th 1872

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