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Voline

Victor Serge

29 October 1945

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Voline (Eichenbaum) died of typhus in France a few weeks ago. He was one of the most remarkable figures of Russian anarchism, a man of absolute probity and exceptional rigor of thought, full of talent, perpetual youth, and combativeness. He'd just passed age sixty. He played a role of real importance in the Russian Revolution. In 1905 he was one of the true founders of the first soviet in Petersburg. Later a refugee in the United States and Canada, he continued his life of a theoretician and militant, penetrated with Kropotkinian idealism. Returned to Petrograd in 1917, he participated in all the revolutionary struggles, briefly directed a syndicalist organ, *Golos Truda (The Voice of Labor)*¹, whose influence rivaled that of Bolshevik newspapers. From 1917 he considered that the dictatorship of the proletariat would necessarily result in a regime of terror destined to paralyze the democratic forces. From 1918 he was in Ukraine with Nestor Makhno as the intellectual organizer of the vast movement of "rebellious

¹ Before 1914 the organ of the Union of Russian Workers of the US and Canada, it transferred to Petrograd and the paper of the Union for Anarcho-Syndicalist Propaganda from 1917–1918 before being closed down by the Bolsheviks in 1919.

peasants,” which Lenin and Trotsky considered granting local autonomy (this just and generous solution would have spared the Soviet regime many internal calamities), but which Bolshevik centralization ended by mercilessly smashing. Voline had split with Makhno before this bloody epilogue. He saw too well the defects and weaknesses of the libertarian movement of the peasantry, which he would have liked to cleanse and provide with a more intelligent leadership. Suffering from typhus, arrested by the Ukrainian Cheka, which wanted to execute him immediately, we had great difficulty in saving him, having Lenin personally intervene. In prison he was offered the post of commissar for public education in the Ukraine, which he refused. In 1921 the demarches of Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman obtained his liberation and banishment. He would live in Berlin and then Paris the hard life of the implacably intransigent intellectual militant, that is, unpopular among his own libertarian comrades. I found him in Marseilles in 1940–1941 working as a ticket seller in a small movie theater, living on nothing, finishing the writing of his *History of the Civil War in Ukraine*. Though Jewish, he refused to cross the Atlantic hoping to participate in European events, about which he maintained a romantic optimism. Thin, rather short, a mobile face terminating in a short, white beard, determined gestures, lively speech, brusque repartee, he put me in mind of the old rebel Blanqui. We were rarely in agreement, but for more than twenty years we were able to maintain cordial and trusting relations. Was his precious manuscript saved? I don’t know.² One must hope that the future will render justice to this intrepidly idealistic revolutionary who was always, in prison, in the poverty of

² The manuscript in question is probably *The Unknown Revolution*, which was published by “the Friends of Voline” in 1947 and re-issued many times since

exile, as on the battlefield and in editorial offices, a man of real moral grandeur.