

# But who, after all, was Victor Serge?

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*Unforgiving Years*, by Victor Serge, translated by Richard Greeman, NYRB Classics, 2008, 368 pages (paperback)

“Who was Victor Serge?” That question is asked ever more of late, usually as a springboard to telling the life story of the Bolshevik, novelist and opponent of Stalinism, which is fascinating and often twisted to quite disreputable political purposes. Serge, born Victor Lvovich Kibalchich in Belgium in 1890 to exiled Russian parents, died penniless in Mexico in 1947 with his last publications written “for the drawer,” as he said, most of them not to see print for decades. Stalinist thugs hunted him until the end. The CIA also put together a thick file on him.

Serge’s last novel, *Unforgiving Years*, has been brought back into print this year in a publishing venture of the *New York Review of Books*, which brought us *The Case of Comrade Tulayev* in 2003.

Like Leon Trotsky, Serge (1890-1947) was a citizen on the planet without a passport. With only *The Case of Comrade Tulayev* (1948) in print during the Cold War period, he came to be ranked among the writers from Arthur Koestler and George Orwell to Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn who witnessed for the right what totalitarian horror the Soviet Union, “the god that failed,” had become. The source of that horror, it was claimed, went back to Bolshevik policies and practices from the beginning of the Russian Revolution.

Serge had written his last books as a former Bolshevik at a time when the international working class suffered a staggering series of defeats with the rise of Hitler in 1933, the Moscow Trials and the extermination of the socialist opposition in the USSR in the late 1930s, the fascist victory in the Spanish Civil War of 1936-1938, Stalin’s deal attempting to placate Hitler in 1939, the murder of Trotsky in 1940 and the start of World War II.

With the fall of France to German forces in June 1940, Serge had joined the trail of tears that brought the European left intelligentsia to Marseilles in southern France and, ultimately, exile in a desperate attempt to escape from Hitler’s reach, a consequence of the betrayals, above all, of Stalinism and the disaster of its Popular Front policy subordinating the working class to bourgeois liberal parties from 1935 onward.

“Here is a beggar’s alley gathering the remnants of revolutions, democracies and crushed intellectuals,” Serge wrote of his Marseilles period, excellently covered in Rosemary Sullivan’s *Villa Air-Bel* (2003), named after the mansion where he played Surrealistic cards with André Breton and discussed with writer and future cabinet minister André Malraux the latter’s affiliation with the nationalist cause of Charles de Gaulle.

This was not the same man who arrived, a young revolutionary, in Finland Station in 1919, and walked across the square where Lenin had proclaimed the rule of the working class two years earlier. Serge joined the Bolsheviks in the starving and exposed city of Petrograd, or St. Petersburg, when they were most isolated. A firm Bolshevik for a time, he defended Lenin and Trotsky in numerous articles for the French leftist press. The skepticism and doubts came later, after he had witnessed the degeneration of the Soviet regime from Lenin to the horrors of Stalin’s rule.

In *The Case of Comrade Tulayev*, Serge reported from his Mexican exile to the world on the work of the Stalinist apparatus in a unique detective

novel. It has no hero except the suffering masses; their frightened, bureaucratic rulers are identified by one or another brilliantly drawn example, from life it appears. The novel was composed nearly a decade after, and inspired by, the 1934 assassination of Sergey Kirov, the Stalinist Leningrad party head, which became the pretext for the round-up of Old Bolsheviks and the horrifying purge trials.

The *Case of Comrade Tulayev* was written soon after Trotsky was assassinated, the latter having decisively and forcefully severed all relations with Serge over a host of issues, above all, his conciliation with centrism. That made Serge very useful to the American right in the Cold War. Taken out of context, his novel was numbered among the then-popular genre of “agents-of-the-Comintern-who-turned-away-from-Stalin-in-horror” to impress upon Americans the evil consequences of the Russian Revolution, which had promised a leap from the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom and instead supposedly produced in its wake the cruelties and shortages of Stalin’s system.

And so, years pass, and Victor Serge came again to life at the turn of this century within a broad gathering of “libertarians” and “free-thinkers” “re-imagining” Marx, among those, in other words, who lack any sympathy for the traditions and revolutionary practices of Marxist Socialism. The varied radical currents and their journals tend to share the late-period Serge in contesting, after the event, the harsher aspects of Bolshevik policy, even under conditions of revolution and civil war, including the suppression of the Kronstadt rebellion in 1921. (See: “A letter and reply on the Kronstadt rebellion”)

The International Socialist tendency, which professes allegiance to Trotskyism while rejecting the core of Trotsky’s Marxism, has for decades named Serge among the foremost Bolsheviks. The late Peter Sedgwick, one of their chief theoreticians, translated Serge’s *Memoirs of a Revolutionary 1908-1941* for Oxford Press in 1963 and wrote many articles in support of Serge’s argument, late in life, after many bitter experiences, that the secret police and secret trials doomed the Bolsheviks and led directly to Stalin’s “totalitarianism,” a word Serge is sometimes falsely credited with inventing. Such journals as *What Next?* and *Critique* have paid attention, and the anarchist press can hardly contain itself at every mention of his name.

In 1997, the Victor Serge Library opened in Russia to bring youths alternatives to the “Communism” their fathers and mothers had known. As first item, his *Memoirs of a Revolutionary* was translated and published by the library’s publishing arm. “Friends of the Victor Serge Library” was formed with such prominent lefts as Tariq Ali and Ken Loach among its members. One of Susan Sontag’s last essays, “The Unextinguished: The Case of Victor Serge,” serves as a foreword to *The Case of Comrade Tulayev* (2003). The same essay appears in her last collection, *At the Same Time and Other Essays* (2008), so the question of who Serge was becomes the springboard to a false narrative, as Sedgwick seemed to have noticed in a paper found in his files, and posthumously published as “The Unhappy Elitist: Victor Serge’s Early Bolshevism.”

Sedgwick looked into Serge’s writing during the Russian Revolution and found a different man, a Bolshevik earnestly defending the Communist Party’s monopoly of power and use of terror as an instrument

without which, Trotsky remarked, fascism would have been a Russian word. Sedgwick concludes that Serge was able to entertain dialectically opposite views without finding the need to resolve them in a synthesis, rather like Keats' "negative capability."

There is a simpler explanation: Serge was genuinely a Bolshevik in the early 1920s, but the defeats and tragedies of the 1930s and 1940s eventually weighed on him, and on a great many other former revolutionaries. After all, Serge had witnessed in his life the failed Anarchist rising in Barcelona in 1917, the aborted proletarian rising in Germany in 1923 and the tragic failure of the Spanish Revolution in 1938. He first arrived in Russia in 1919 through Finland where the White Terror was crushing the workers' rising of 1918, just in time to witness encirclement, starvation and imminent defeat of the Bolshevik government threatened with Allied invasion outside, and abandoned by its erstwhile left allies inside the country.

He went back to the Soviet Union in 1926 as a Left Oppositionist at the time of its defeat. Then he took up the pen almost exclusively, as he explained, after a blinding revelation at the time of a near-death experience in 1928. Serge best expressed in literature his revolutionary passions in youth, and later, his disappointments and frustrations with the hold the Stalinists and the Social Democrats had on the working class, when the revolutionary left was distressingly small in numbers and lacking in influence.

He held on for a long time, but he did not hold on to the end. Unhappily, where Serge was headed politically in his sunset years may be gauged more specifically by a letter he wrote some six days before his death to Malraux pledging support to the bourgeois nationalist cause of de Gaulle whose minister of information the French novelist had become.

A portrait is generally painted of Serge the early dissident who conducted a one-man war against certain Bolshevik policies. Much of Sontag's and other reviewers' information about Serge comes from Susan Weissman's misleading biography, regrettably the only one in existence, *Victor Serge: The Course Is Set on Hope* (2002). It's a biography in which there is precious little space for Serge's novels and poetry, his literary friendships with the greatest French and Russian writers and his polemics on such issues as proletarian literature.

The most grievous errors in Weissman's biography result from a reliance on the demoralized Serge's memoirs written in 1944 to explain the young Serge, who had joined a great many of the most committed revolutionaries, many anarchists among them, and rallied 25 years earlier to the Bolsheviks and their attempt to build an international of disciplined revolutionary parties. Trotsky replied to the various liberal moralists like Weissman, who equate the revolutionary violence of the Bolsheviks with the crimes of the Stalinists in the name of rejecting Marxist "amoralism," in his classic *Their Morals and Ours*.

Having studied the programs of various parties still active in Petrograd in 1919, Serge consciously chose Lenin's party and manned a submachine gun post while Yudenich's White Armies were at the gates of the city of the revolution's birth. Trotsky arrived on the scene, rallied the defenders when it seemed hopeless and drove Yudenich's White forces all the way back to Estonia whence they came. Serge never actually fired the submachine gun, but as an intimate of the greatest Russian poets rallying to the Revolution, he wrote the poem "The Machine Gun," rather in the style of Mayakovsky's "You/ have the floor/ Comrade Mauser."

Serge's poem was published in Henri Barbusse's influential *Clarté* magazine, which became his venue as the writer the French public came to know well under the *nom de plume* of "Victor Serge." The poem was followed by a series of articles describing the great inspiration that the Bolshevik revolution gave the arts, not only as a subject matter, but as the basis of startling formal innovations.

Serge helped organize the first three congresses of the Communist Third International and served in various responsible positions in Lenin's party.

It may be of some interest to those trying to establish Serge as an early Bolshevik "dissident" to read his report on the work of the czarist Okhrana, which can be found online under the title: "What Everyone Should Note about Repression."

Much of the work is a manual for leading an underground existence and protecting the revolutionary organization against spies and provocateurs. Following Trotsky's lead, Serge makes a moral distinction at the collective level between the revolutionary terror of the working class, which represents the majority of the population and the progress of humanity, and the reactionary terror of the ruling class aimed at maintaining its cruel rule. Finally, on the personal and artistic levels, Serge sets the machine gun against the typewriter in one section of the work as a choice when responding with violence to violence. Serge was ready to combine them, the political and the artistic, as of equal worth in the struggle for world revolution.

Both *Unforgiving Years* and *The Case of Comrade Tulayev* in 2003 have been wonderfully translated by Richard Greeman, who has spent his academic and post-academic life bringing to prominence Serge's writings as literature in the first ranks of modernism and in the mainstream of Russian and French literature. His foreword to *Unforgiving Years* is worth the price of the book, which deserves attention as well for reminding us that the political novel was once a prominent genre and fulfilled a need hard to meet in this self-absorbed literary period. It also gives us a clear-eyed picture of Serge's sad last years when hope, if it existed at all, was mostly the frail hope of inmates in prisons and concentration camps.

We come back to our question: Who, after all, was Victor Serge? For one thing, and this is not unrelated to his more general struggle on behalf of humanity, Serge was a fine writer. In the wise words of William Carlos Williams: "It is difficult/ to get the news from poems/ yet men die miserably every day/ for lack/ of what is found there."

There is a marvelous episode at the beginning of *Unforgiving Years*, a novel of the Second World War and its immediate prelude and aftermath, in which the Soviet Colonel Fontov, who has been released from a penal colony to serve in the defense of Leningrad, explains at great length his present world view to Daria, who was similarly released to work as a translator. It is clear that under pressure the Colonel had gone mad, and turns the Stalinist nationalist line he spouts into an absurdity.

Ordered to send his men out on a hopeless mission, the Colonel is in an impossible position. If the men he sends out to capture a German prisoner are all killed, which is likely, he will be blamed, and yet he will be blamed if he doesn't follow orders and send out his men on the mission. The tension is raised to a hysterical pitch, which Serge manages beautifully. Apparently, the mission is successful. Only two men are lost, and a German NCO is captured for interrogation purposes. One problem, however—the officer is as mad as the Colonel, and insists that his Russian interrogators are German officers and that he is being charged with betraying the Führer in whom he has great faith.

The novel is organized in four "movements," a symphonic structure that allows the key themes and guiding images to arise, get combined and recombined as if they were motifs in a piece of classical music. The predominant image of besieged Leningrad in the second "movement" is the harsh cold and the absence of fire, except in the office of the top party bureaucrat. In the third "movement," there is the opposite problem when incendiary devices rain down on German cities that have entire districts set on fire and reduced to ashes.

Characters emerge, develop and disappear or re-emerge vastly changed, though an ironic pattern links them as victims of mad ideologies, whether they are Germans or Soviet citizens. For instance, a new character appears in the novel's third section, a woman called Brigitte who seems to be having a mystical experience throughout the firebombing of her city. While other Germans are desperately fleeing for shelter underground, Brigitte ascends to the roof, the stars and the city lit by bombs, to be closer

to “Him” up in the heavens whom she worships. It is not God, but Brigitte’s lover, a German NCO lost on the Russian front, evidently the captured soldier at the close of the second “movement” of the novel.

As Brigitte later reads her lover’s letters from the front, she learns of horrible atrocities that he witnessed and perpetrated. Like the Soviet Colonel of the Leningrad section of the novel, the NCO had gone crazy from the horror. Still professing belief in the Führer and the National Socialist cause, he expresses the ideology in the reasoning of a mad person.

In this way, various themes and symbolic devices are ironically juxtaposed against each other, creating a complex organizing device in a seemingly episodic novel. We are introduced at the start to an agent of Stalin who had become disillusioned. D., or Sacha, has fleeting, hopeful memories of the heroic early days of the revolution drowned by the overwhelming dread that possesses him, having lost close comrades liquidated by a suspicious “Leader,” Stalin, whose apparatus has seemed to have taken on a life of its own outside any rational control, including that of the dictator. D. has decided to flee, foolishly sending in his letter of resignation before finding safety. As we accompany the shattered agent through his last days in Paris, we come to understand the terrible predicament of Serge’s generation.

It’s a grand day in Paris, and D. is at loose ends waiting to meet his lover, Nadine, whom he had badly compromised, and now needs to convince to flee with him. On the way to the meeting, D. meets the painter Alain, who was recruited by D. and remains a convinced Stalinist. To make matters more dangerous, D. tells Alain of his intention to defect, not knowing that Alain has become Nadine’s lover. It gets even more complicated. D. has a comrade from the revolutionary days, Daria, who is told of the defection by Nadine.

Of some importance is D.’s distaste for the Parisians who, unaware of the catastrophe on tracks and heading toward them, blithely discuss recipes in cafés and enjoy the sunshine of the Bois de Boulogne. This is now a man cut off from the masses and his revolutionary past, increasingly given to doubts about the ethical nature of the revolutionary party that has sank so low: “Could we have got it horribly wrong on some hidden point?,” “Did we bring about the opposite of what we wanted to do?,” “Did we not forget man and his soul?”

Daria is the character we follow through the tragic, besieged city of Leningrad in 1941 and then as he’s parachuted into devastated Germany. Daria and D. meet again in Mexico. By this time, D. has become a prosperous landlord, Don Bruno. Nadia has gone mad, and there is the uneasy feeling of loss and emptiness of people so deeply scarred that the normal life for which they long will be forever out of their reach.

A few years before the writing of *Unforgiving Years*, a defector, actually the head of Stalin’s apparatus who met with Serge in Paris, Walter Krivitsky, died in a hotel room in Washington under mysterious circumstance. Earlier, another Soviet agent, Ignace Reiss, in the process of defecting to Trotskyism, was murdered by Stalinist agents on his way to meeting Serge in Switzerland.

Richard Greeman reminds us in his foreword to *Unforgiving Years* of the state of mind of its author. This is from a note in Victor Serge’s FBI files. Serge wrote about Krivitsky:

“There had been some fine moments in his life; he had been courageous and devoted. Now in his soul, he was a defeated man. But these types of struggles are so out of proportion to any man’s powers—and to one who was misled during the decisive years of his life, that it didn’t astonish me. Rare are those who know how to resist demoralization in defeat.”





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