

## Mémoires d'un Révolutionnaire

V.Serge

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Victor Serge was the *mom de plume* of a franco-Russian writer by the name of Kibalchich Кибальчич. He was the son of Russian anti-Czar exiles and accidentally born in Bruxelles in 1890. He was brought up in poverty, a younger brother died from malnutrition<sup>1</sup>, but after that his father had acquired a teaching position, matters improved. Yet he did not receive any formal education, but the basic education he received was through reading and the erratic (if enthusiastic) instructions his father felt fit to give him (predominantly on natural science, geography and history). When he was fifteen his parents broke up and he was on his own. He supported himself as an apprentice to a photographer, while starting to write and publish in political journals. He drifted towards anarchism opposing the Belgian incorporation of Congo. He intermittently studied law at the université Nouvelles de Bruxelles<sup>2</sup>. In 1909 he moved to Paris and became active in anarchist circles, writing and translating. His possession of a couple of revolvers led to thirteen months imprisonment later to be followed by five years imprisonment due to involvement in anarchistic criminal activities, released in 1917 and expelled to Spain, spending time in Barcelona, returning to France, where he was imprisoned again and then exchanged with Russian prisoners and arriving in Russia in early 1919 and joining the Bolsheviks and working for the government. By that time he had left his first wife (of 1915), known as Rirette Maitrejean (Anna Estorge), for Liouba Roussakov, with whom he would have a son (Vladimir) in 1920<sup>3</sup>. Although initially connected with Zioniev in Petrograd/Leningrad, he would drift into the circle around Trotsky. As the 1920 proceeded he would become more and more disenchanted by the regime and in 1928 he would be deprived of his membership in the party and suffer his first arrestation, be it of short duration. His wife Liouba would develop serious mental problems which would incapacitate her for the rest of her life. In 1933 he was arrested again, refusing to sign a confession (which probably saved his life) he was exiled to Orenburg close to the Urals and Kazakhstan. The family of his wife, soon to be committed to a psychiatric institution, were persecuted and his sister-in-law (Anna Roussakov) imprisoned and forced to give false testimony to him, and would eventually be sent to the GULAG for twenty years. The French writer and socialist Raymond Rolland managed in 1935 to intervene with Stalin on his behalf who granted his expulsion from the Soviet Union; but his eventual release would not be effected until the next year. France refused to grant him entry, but he was able to return to Belgium. He had difficulties to find gainful employment but managed to write and publish, books and articles. Mostly

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<sup>1</sup> Raoul-Albert (1893-1902)

<sup>2</sup> Founded in 1894 by names such as Paul Janosn, Edmond Picard and Guillaume De Greef (who served as President), and closed down in 1919

<sup>3</sup> Who would become a painter, working in Mexico, dying in 2005. A daughter Jeanette would be followed in 1935, dying in 2011

political but also pure fiction, albeit with a strong political theme. Managed to move to Paris, which he was forced to leave for Marseilles in view of the German occupation. He tried desperately to get a visa allowing him to leave France, and finally through the efforts of some American socialists <sup>4</sup>the Mexican President granted him one and he was able to leave on the last boat from Marseilles with his son<sup>5</sup>. He spent his last years of his life in Mexico, during which he wrote his memoirs (published posthumously in 1951) and dying of a heart attack in 1947. He was buried as a Spanish revolutionary in a French cemetery.

Looking back on his turbulent life he referred to the saying of Nietzsche *Was mich nicht umbringt, macht mich strker*. Continuing *Je n'ai jamais eu de biens, presque jamais vécu en sécurité*. He reveals that he has often been deprived of everything he had had, such as manuscripts, books, and personal mementos, in particular in connection with his expulsion from the Soviet Union, which has taught him indifference to material possessions. His life has been one of rootlessness starting with his birth in exile. This has had many advantages, he admits, it widens your vision of the world and your knowledge of people, it liberates you from the mists of conformism; on the other hand it makes you handicapped as to the daily struggle for existence. Serge had no sympathy for people who live their lives only for themselves, in particular for personal enrichment, which can never provide the goal of a life. As to the Russian Revolution, which was the pivotal event of his life, he writes

*J'ai discerné tout de suite dans la Révolution russe les germs de maux profondes tels que l'intolérance et le penchant à la persécution des dissidents. Ils provenaient d'un sentiment absolu de possession de la vérité enté sur la rigidité doctrinale. Il aboutissait au mépris de l'homme différent, des ce arguments, de ces façons d'être.*

And as to his political commitments he writes *Nous sommes les jésuits rouge, au sense le meilleur du mot*. He continues to ask what is the scientific value of a doctrine when once in power it no longer, ostensibly in the interest of the State, allows disinterested investigations. And repeats that the liberty of thoughts appears to him one of the most essential values. Our great Russian Marxists, scientifically nourished, do not admit that one can put in question the concept of the dialectic of nature, which being nothing but a hypothesis is difficult to support. In particular he reminds his readers that Trotsky did not want to tolerate any opinion different from his own. The author stops to contemplate that he has lived long enough to have experienced the almost vertiginous nature of the breaking in of the 20th century, and remembered the amazement as a boy to see vehicles in the street moving without the aid of horses and learn about the feats accomplished by the first aviators. Indeed I would claim that the revolutionary changes to everyday life that accompanied the turn of the century had no real counterparts during the turn of the millennium a century later. This optimism that pervaded people back then had not prevailed but mostly evaporated during the coming century, a fact one needs to keep in mind when judging the revolutionaries of that time and to appreciate the mood which guided their thoughts and hopes.

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<sup>4</sup> notably Dwight MacDonald and his wife Nancy

<sup>5</sup> His new companion - Laurette Séjourné, with whom he had left the Soviet Union was able to join him a year later bringing his daughter Jeanette with her.

As indicated this is not so much a personal autobiography, one does indeed not get a very good idea of the author's personality, as a memoir, i.e. a witness account in which events and personalities pass through, being registered more than reflected upon. In a sense one can liken it to a dream crowded with events, one following the other, in a confusing profusion. Isherwood coined the notion of being a camera, and Serge is a camera filming automatically, not unlike a modern surveillance gadget; and also in real life he was an observer whose sole means of action was his pen.

Many personages pass on review. On Clemenceau he writes *Et ce fut en effet la grande chance de la bourgeois de trouver á l'heure de la crise ce vieil homme énérgique et tétu. Nous le déstions autant que nous l'admirions.* About Miguel Almereyda (Eugène Vigo (1883-1917)), nowadays an obscure and forgotten personality back then the editor of the journal *Le Bonnet Rouge*, he writes:

*Il brûlait sa vie, devenue morphinomane, entouré des gens de théâtre, de maîtres chanteurs, de jolies femmes et d'entremetteurs politique de toutes variétés. Vertige de l'argent et du risque! La courbe de son destine, partis des base-fonds de Paris, montée au zénith de la combativité revolutionnaire, finissait dans la pourriture, sous le coffres-forts.*

As to his final imprisonment before release he writes that the regime at the camp was good enough and free enough, only one starved. And then the Spanish flu struck and people started to die like flies. In a few weeks a quarter of the population had died, but none of the rich.

He was taken by boat to Russia by way of Denmark and Finland, passing by Elsinore he remarks that *L'être ou le non-être, pour les hommes de notre temps, c'est la volonté ou la servitude, il n'est que de choisir!* And it was on his way from Finland to Petrograd that he met the family Roussakov and their daughter Liouba, who would be his new companion. Arriving in Russia he soon joined the Bolsheviks who recently had taken power. Anti-Bolshevism was the norm among the intellectuals. They considered it finished done away with through famine and terror, opposed by the intellectuals, the peasants, most of the workers. And those words came from those who had ardently taken part in the February revolution.

Lenin, Trotsky, Karl Radek, Bukharin formed the brain of the revolution, according to Segre. Thanks to their common Marxist language and common experience of both European and American Socialism, they seemed to think collectively. And it is really this collective and consensual thinking that forms the basis of a party, the author points out. In comparison Lounatcharsky, for all his cultural merits, appeared a mere dilettante. Zinoviev was nothing more than a populariser of Lenin's ideas and Tchitcherine, a specialist in foreign policy, never left his archives, and Kalinin nothing but a cunning peasant with an intuitive grasp of the common spirit.

Lenin is described with a tall domed skull almost bald, but with the banal features of the typical Russian. His face was rosy and remarkably fresh and with a reddish stubble and slightly protruding cheekbones. His eyes were horizontal but his laughter made them appear oblique and grayish green in color. He exuded good will and joyful maliciousness. Serge also emphasized the simplicity of his living. He lived in a modest apartment in the Kremlin, formerly assigned to the domestic staff. The previous winter, he had like everyone else lacked proper heating. When he went to the barber he took his place and waited in

line. An old maid managed his household and mended his clothes.

As to Bukharin he describes him as follows

*Le front haute, largement dégarni aux tempes, les cheveux rares, son nez légèrement retroussée, sa moustache et sa barbiche d'un châtain roussâtre, lui donnaient un air de grand gosse russe moyen que son vêtement négligé accentuait. Il se vêtait à la diable, comme s'il n'avait jamais eu le temps de s'ajuster un complet à sa taille.*

He then goes on to refer to his jovial expression, his sense of humor, and how he devoured books in several languages. And his pleasure in debating any serious issue.

Radek spoke all other languages except his own native with an incredible accent. A Jew from Galicia a Nestor in socialist circles in Galicia, Poland, Germany and Russia, and as a publicist equally gifted at synthesis as sarcasm. Skinny and rather short, hectic and brimming over with anecdotes both ferocious and cruelly realistic. Irregular features, his eyes very myopic, surrounded by tortoise-shelled glasses, his face rosy and framed by a beard such that you used to see on old sea dogs. His gait had something apish, his thick lips grinning and talking incessantly.

Both Radek and Bukharin promoted already in 1918 nationalization of the major industries, while Lenin still thought in terms of a mixed economy restraining the excesses of capitalism.

Kalinin worked in a modest office simply furnished in an unassuming building close to the Kremlin. His face was wrinkled with a neatly trimmed goatee. It made him look like a shrewd peasant with an intellectual demur. The author and him could talk quite freely. When asked about the unconstitutional arrests of the members of the opposition, he turned to look you straight in your face with a peaceful and most sympathetic expression, explaining *C'est tous à fait faux. On raconte tant de choses! Nous n'avons arrêté que ce qui livraient à des menées antisoviétiques, quelques dizaines de personnes au plus.*

As to Trotsky his attitude was far more complex. Trotsky took responsibility for the economical side. Furthermore *Il apparaissait vêtu d'un sorte uniform blanc sans insigne et coiffé d'un large kepi plat, blanc aussi; de belle prestance, la poitrine large, barbiche et cheveux très fondé, éclaire de lorgnons...* Many of us, Serge writes, admired him but did not love him. He continues to claim that Trotsky's severity, his demands on punctuality in work and combat, and his insidious demagogy, did not really influence him much, but his way of solving political problems struck him as dictatorial in spirit. Had he not proposed the armies of work, the militarization of industry in order to deal with its dilapidation? But, he admits, at the time we did not know that he had in vain argued for the abolishing of requisition and that the army of work actually had facilitated demobilization. He had worked behind the scene with remarkable energy. Serge had seen him in action speaking French to a foreign delegation. His French had been slightly incorrect but fluent. Trotsky advocated a long period of dictatorship, maybe dozens of years, during the transition to socialism. This rigidity of thought somewhat scared Serge.

Early on Serge gets to be disillusioned about the prospects of the Revolution. Left to themselves the Russians are lost, they may have spent themselves in their superhuman effort to create a new society, now it is up to the West to take over.

Serge considered that the creation of the Checka as one of the major mistakes made,

by the Bolsheviks who lost their heads in face of the complots against them, the blockades and the foreign interventions. For the first time the machinery of police repression had come into the hands of the revolutionaries.

Yet as to the terror of the Civil War he remarks that had the Whites won and imposed their dictatorship there would surely have followed massacres on the vanquished Reds. In fact if we do not shoot them they will shoot us. No place for humanism during such circumstances. Also in addition to the Reds and the Whites of the Civil War there were the so called Greens, the most pernicious. He does not elaborate though.

After the Civil War the economy was in tatters. Serge remarks

*La Nouvelle politique économique donnait les résultats merveilleux. Des restaurants se rouvraient, on vendait chose inouïe! des pâtisseries manageable à une rouble! La population commençait à respirer, les gens parlaient du retour à capitalisme, c'est-à-dire à la prospérité*

Serge was in accordance with the policies advocated by Trotsky. More specifically against the exaggerated pace of the industrialization, the forced collectivization, and the unrealistic plans, and above all the power of the bureaucracy to impose such suffering. Yet they admitted the success of the industrialization accomplished through those means, an industrialization they had always proposed. This success they attributed to the immense moral capital of the socialist revolution. And they stayed convinced *qu'un régime de démocratie socialiste eût fait mieux, infiniment mieux et plus, avec moins de frais, sans famine, sans terreur, sans étouffement de la pensée*. The problem is of course that this belongs to the realm of counterfactual speculation, which in history, unlike in the natural sciences, is non-falsifiable and hence a dead-end, however psychologically irresistible<sup>6</sup>.

Thus the rulers co-opted the policies suggested by the opposition but made the more extreme. Where the opposition had suggested taxes on the rich peasants they had ended up suppressing them, when there had been suggestions on restrictions and reforms on the NEP, they ended up abolishing them. And finally when the opposition had worked for promoting industrialization, they had inflicted a super-industrialization on society with a huge amount of suffering.

Just a few days after his release from prison in the early summer of 1928 he was seized with severe stomach pains, they turned out to be a bowel obstruction, and Serge feared for his life.

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<sup>6</sup> However, one cannot avoid it completely, whenever we try to judge a historical process, we need to judge individual choices, and those cannot be judged properly without some kind of counter-factual reasoning; why was that choice better than others that could have been made? This involves assertions which cannot be tested; thus a great deal of historical contemplation cannot be impeccably scientific, and would we insist on rigor, a large part of historical scrutiny would have to be abolished, in many ways the most interesting aspects of it. Still of course much can still be done, like establishing the facts on the grounds, following Rilke's strictures of finding out what really happened, and more generally what choices did the actors encounter. Knowing the circumstances and the concomitant limitations may make history more understandable to us, but even here, the degree of understanding depends on judgments basically based on counter-factual speculation.

- *Croyez-vous que je vivrait? lui demandai-je.*
- *je le crois, répondit-il sérieusement*
- *je vous remercie*

He was told the next morning that he was saved. He then made the decision to become a writer. Admittedly he had been writing a lot earlier in his life, but when he got engaged in the Russian revolution he had if not given it up altogether found it to be of secondary importance, one surmises that he now would give it top priority. He lived through and partook of historical events to which he could at least contribute his testimonies as a witness, yet serious historical writing did not totally satisfy him, because it required means (access to archives etc) and above all a calmness he did not possess during thus tumultuous times, and probably never would. Historical narrative also had its limitations according to him, through its requirements of rigor it could not do justice to the inner lives of the historical actors<sup>7</sup> For this reason he was drawn to literature which he viewed with great respect, as opposed to mere *littérature* in the fashionable sense, for which he merely had contempt. Why write? Some do it out of pure pleasure, and occasionally do it well, others pursue it as an occupation, in order to earn a living and to attract some attention maybe even a measure of fame. Some do it, because they have a message within them that they want to convey and thereby contributing to humanity, if not they merely add to the market of books. His own motivation he expresses accordingly

*je concevais, je conçois encore l'écrit comme ayant besoin d'une justification plus fort un moyen d'exprimer pour les hommes ce que la plupart vivent sans savoir l'exprimer, comme un moyen de communion, comme un témoignage sur la vaste vie qui fuit à travers nous et dont nous devons tenter de fixer les aspects essentiels pour ceux qui viendront après nous.*

He concludes that he is a writer in the spirit of Russian writers. He adds that he knows that he will never have the time to polish his writings. He also points out that poets and novelists are not political in spirit because they are not essentially rational. The political mind, needs in addition to the idealism necessary for a revolutionary, to have a sound scientific appreciation and a pragmatic spirit. The artists on the other hand can rely on intuition and a rich internal life, and need not understand what they actually create, nor where they are heading. He surmises that the politician must know. Soviet literature was flowering between 1921 and 1928, he claims (incidentally the period of NEP) but declined thereafter. It might be interesting to partake of some of his opinions on writers.

The poet Blok was a western gentleman of British type, with an elongated face, serious and seldom smiling, with blue eyes and exuding a refined dignity. For fifteen years, Serge writes, with the emergence of symbolism in Russian literature, he was its foremost poet.

Biely is being likened to James Joyce as a stylist, and is a both a poet and a prose

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<sup>7</sup> Incidentally this is what R.G.Collingwood sees as the essential feature of a historical narrative, to try and disclose the objective thoughts of those who make crucial decisions, as to make those decisions understandable. It is this emphasis on human thought and its influence on history that makes history a humanistic project as opposed to natural history (to some extent one can think of archaeology as half-way between).

writer as well as a theosophist. Embarrassed by his baldness he always wears a black cap below which his big green-blue eyes never cease to sparkle. He lauds his intellectual vitality, prodigiously varied, combining a spiritual enthusiasm with visionary insights and an almost infantile candor. Biely was, one can add, although Serge does not mention it, the son of a distinguished mathematician<sup>8</sup>, and not adverse to it himself his works containing many allusions to mathematical concepts.

Gorky, whom his parents-in-law knew well, he once caught sight of in the back of a large Lincoln. He struck him as being totally isolated, separated from the street, the city, Russian life in general, and reduced to an algebraic symbol, whatever that meant. He had not aged since he saw him last, but lost a lot of weight, dried out to the point of being emaciated, a Turkish cap covering his bony skull that looked like a death skull with his hollowed eye-sockets and pointed cheekbones. Nothing was alive save the will still to live and think.

Alexis Tolstoy he had met in Berlin 1922, then he was a counter-revolutionary linked to the Whites, yet negotiating to return to Russia to claim his copyrights (past as well as future) as a writer. Prudently liberal, and a sincere patriot. An honest stylist, capable to cater to the tastes of the public and competent to write successful novels on contemporary issues. He had the manners of an old Russian gentleman of the past. He was once invited to his place to listen to the first chapters of his book on Peter the Great an obvious stand in for the General Secretary. His home was imperially furnished.

Gide was a *compagnon de route* and met him several times in Bruxelles and Paris. Well into his sixties he was nevertheless young in appearance and thought. His smooth face with its large domed forehead was severe as if fashioned through an incessant internal effort, it revealed timidity overcome with a steady scrupulousness. He was dubious about Gide's notes from his visit to the Soviet union, but his misgivings were due not to its contents but the decision to have them published.

And finally about the writer, philosopher and political activist Lukacs.

*J'appréciais pour tout George Lukacs.... philosophe nourri de Hegel, de Marx, de Freud, esprit libre et rigoureux, il écrivait de grands livres qui ne devaient pas voir le jour. Je voyais en lui un de ces cervaux de premier ordre qui eussent pu donner au communisme une grandeur intellectuelle si le communisme s'était développé en tant que mouvement social, au lieu de dégénérer en mouvement de soutien d'une puissance autoritaire.*

In 1933 Serge was really getting into trouble, as noted, but he was lucky being exiled to Orenburg. A city, as noted, by the Urals close to Kazakhstan with a severe climate. Long winters with temperatures down to  $-42^{\circ}\text{C}$  and hot summers with temperatures up to  $42^{\circ}\text{C}$ , yet as far as banishments went a rather benign place, where one tenth of the population consisted of forced exiles yet largely left to themselves by the security forces. At least half of the poor inhabitants, including school children and old women were alcoholic, and during revolutionary festivals dead drunk. There he managed to find time to write and take care of his son.

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<sup>8</sup> Nikolai Bugaev (1837-1903) known as a champion of 'hard analysis' and the teacher of Egorov, and through him grandfather of Kolmogorov and Luzin

The times were bad, and he reflects on the issue of sabotage, In fact a regime which is always on the look out for sabotage everywhere will find them as well, and the accusations of which will always be irrefutable. He refers to his brother-in-law engaged in a construction on a kolzhoz. To be truthful, he reports to the author, the material I need is delivered too late and of substandard quality to boot. But I need to go on with my work otherwise I will be considered a counter-revolutionary and sent to a concentration camp. But in so doing the result will be delayed and defective, rendering me vulnerable to accusations of sabotage. Would I try to explain the problems to my superiors they would only refer to my duty of a relentless struggle.

The rupture with Trotsky was inevitable and he expounds on it. He was getting disillusioned by the Trotskists and their claims of really constituting the left opposition and of providing a true rejuvenation of the socialist institutions. He was also very critical of the IV International, launched by Trotsky and never really getting off ground being torn about by fissures and internal quarrels, turning into an impotent sect without the ability to produce new thoughts. Another bone of contention was the Cronstadt uprising of 1921, where he thought that the Bolshevik party, as well as Trotsky never had taken full responsibility and tried to paper it over. However, when it came to contemporary problems in Russia, he was struck by his clairvoyance and stunning intuition, yet he thought that Trotsky had resisted the necessary rejuvenation of the party and to abandon the traditional authoritarianism and intolerance of Russian Marxism of the turn of the century. In fact he remembered that Trotsky had already in 1914 written the perspicuous words *Le bolchevisme pourra être un bon instrument de conquête du pouvoir, mais il revelera ensuite ses aspects contre-revolutionnaires..* Serge published a couple of articles in Paris and New York in which he attacked the failure of the party to address questions of human rights and liberties during the 20's. The Old ('Le Vieux' with which he habitually referred to Trotsky) dismissed his criticism as a mere manifestation of intellectual discouragement by invoking a number of cliches and the trotskist press refused to publish his rectifications. He found in the persecuted the same manners as among the persecutors, ascribing it to the logic of contagion in combat, which led to Trotskyism degenerating to a mere mirror image of the Stalinism it fought, one does not battle with impunity against monstrous social and psychological circumstances.

Finally let us conclude with his remarks on the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. In the eyes of the anti-Stalinists it was an unpardonable act of treason, in the eyes of the Communists it was a brilliant maneuver to free their hands. In reality though, Serge writes, it meant abandoning the Poles, and especially the Polish Jews to Nazism, and to acquiesce in the launching of the war. From a socialist view a stupid treason, from a Russian view an idiotic one, as it stood to reason that a victorious Nazi Reich would sooner or later return with all its power to a Russia isolated and compromised.

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