

THE LIFE OF VICTOR SERGE

Serge was born Victor Lvovich Kibalchich in Brussels on December 30th 1890. His father was an army officer who sympathised with the populist Narodnik movement, responsible for the assassination of the Tsar in 1881, and had barely escaped Russia with his life. His mother, a Polish aristocrat, was a refugee from the bourgeois life of St. Petersburg.

Victor was taken by his parents on their travels round Europe 'in quest of their daily bread and good libraries'. But poverty and hunger were ever present, and Victor watched as his younger brother, Raoul, died of hunger.

With this background, revolutionary politics were in his blood. Together with his friend Raymond Callemin, he joined the Belgian Socialist youth movement, the 'Jeunes Gardes', but quickly tired of their cautious reformist politics and turned to anarchism. At the age of 19 he moved to France where he became involved with anarchist circles in Paris. By 1911, he had met his first love, Rirette, and together they were editing the paper 'L'Anarchie'.

Some of Victor's friends and comrades, intoxicated by the extreme individualism preached in 'L'Anarchie', became part of the Bonnot Gang, which terrorised Paris for six months with a series of daring and bloody crimes. While opposed to their actions, Victor stood by the bandits in the pages of 'L'Anarchie'. In 1912, he and Rirette were arrested.

His refusal to assist police investigations led eventually to a five year jail sentence. Three of his comrades, including Raymond, were guillotined; but Rirette was acquitted, and in 1915 she married Victor so that they could correspond.

After his release in 1917, Victor went to Barcelona. It was there, as a contributor to a syndicalist newspaper 'Tierra y Libertad', that he first adopted the name Serge. In July that year he took part in a syndicalist uprising, which was quickly crushed.

Meanwhile Russia was in the midst of its own revolutionary upheavals, and Serge was determined to take part. Trying to return through France, he was interned as a Bolshevik sympathiser, and it was more than a year before, in January 1919, he was able to leave.

He was one of a group of 40 hostages, to be exchanged for French officers held by the Bolsheviks. Among them was the Roussakov family, Russian Jews who had been living in Marseilles. On the voyage, Serge fell in love with the eldest daughter, Liuba. She was to become his second wife.

When Serge arrived in Russia, the revolution was in mortal danger. Surrounded by enemies on all sides, facing sabotage and economic collapse within, its survival could only be achieved by the most ruthless and resolute action. Serge recognised this, but was nevertheless shocked by the repressive measures used by the Bolsheviks. The CHEKA had recently been formed and already it was making mass arrests of suspects, "tending to settle their fate independently, under formal control by the party, but in reality without anybody's knowledge. It was becoming a state within the State..."

Despite his misgivings, Serge threw himself wholeheartedly into the struggle. He joined the Bolsheviks and, with his knowledge of languages, helped to organise the fledgling Communist International. In October 1919, he took part in the defence of Petrograd at the battle of Pulkovo Heights.

The following year he was one of the organisers of the 2nd Congress of the Communist International, and looked after the French delegation. That summer, his son Vlady was born.

With his political background, Serge was one of the few Bolsheviks to maintain a relationship with the Russian anarchists, and it was with particular sadness that he witnessed their inexorable suppression by the Bolsheviks. This led indirectly to a great moment of personal crisis when, in March 1921, the Kronstadt garrison rebelled.

Among the rebels were many anarchists, and Serge's father-in-law, Alexander Roussakov, put his apartment at the disposal of the American anarchists Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman who were trying to mediate. However their efforts failed since, in Serge's opinion, the Bolshevik leadership was determined to crush the uprising by force.

In the aftermath of Kronstadt, Serge tried to withdraw from active politics. In the summer of 1921, he and his father-in-law helped to set up an agricultural commune on an abandoned estate not far from Petrograd. But it failed, due to the hostility of the local peasants.

In 1922, Serge went to Germany as an agent of the Communist International. There, the following year, he helped to organise an attempted insurrection which had to be called off when the Comintern leadership delayed too long. Serge fled to Vienna. After Lenin died in 1924, he became increasingly disillusioned with an organisation that had lost its revolutionary perspective and become little more than an instrument of Soviet foreign policy.

By the time he returned to the Soviet Union, late in 1925, Stalin was in firm control of the party machine. Serge joined the Left Opposition in Leningrad. Already a small minority, they fought for their ideas and their ideals against intimidation, thuggery, and the unquestioning obedience to the leadership of the great majority of party members.

Hopes of success flickered briefly when Zinoviev and Kamenev were ousted by Stalin, and their supporters swelled the ranks of the opposition. But by the end of 1927, they had been crushed by the inexorable party machine. Trotsky was expelled; Zinoviev and Kamenev capitulated.

Defeat for the opposition led to expulsion from the party. In 1928, Serge was arrested. Not for the last time, Serge's foreign connections were to save him. After eight weeks he was released. A few days later he became desperately ill and it was then he resolved to turn full time to writing.

There followed 'five years of resistance waged by a solitary man - surrounded by his family - against the overwhelming pressure of a totalitarian system.' During this time, Serge wrote three novels and a major historical work "Year One of the Russian Revolution". His books were published in France - but not a word appeared in print in the Soviet Union.

As if the struggle to feed his family - almost impossible outside the system - were not enough, Liuba was now being driven mad by constant GPU harrassment. In 1929, agents who shared their communal apartment tried to brand his father-in-law, Alexander Roussakov, as a 'speculator', and an hysterical article in Pravda called for his execution.

In 1933, Serge was arrested again. An attempt to frame him with a false confession allegedly made by his sister in law, Anita, failed. Nevertheless, he was sentenced to three years exile in Orenburg for 'counter revolutionary conspiracy'.

Orenburg, in the southern Urals, was a relatively privileged place of exile, reserved for leading figures. Serge arrived in the summer of 1933, in the midst of a terrible famine. He was soon joined by Liuba and Vlady, but Liuba's illness grew so bad that eventually she had to be sent back to a sanatorium.

Among the exiles in Orenburg were a small group of Left Oppositionists with whom Serge maintained a clandestine political life. Unable to get work, he was forced to rely on money sent from France. Ironically these francs gave him access to the foreign currency Torgsin shop, and he was thus able to buy certain foods unobtainable elsewhere in the town.

During this time, Serge wrote two more novels, a book of poetry and made extensive notes for "Year Two of the Russian Revolution". He sent copies of his manuscripts to Romain Rolland in Paris. Not surprisingly, they never arrived.

Meanwhile left wing intellectuals in France were campaigning for Serge's release. In 1935, an international conference of left wing writers, attended by a Soviet delegation which included Pasternak & Tikhonov, was interrupted by an impassioned appeal delivered by Madeleine Paz. The following year Rolland visited Moscow and raised the whole affair at a meeting with Stalin. As a result, Serge was given permission to leave the Soviet Union.

After being re-united with Liuba and their new baby, Jeannine, born in the clinic, Serge and his family left on the train from Moscow to Poland. At the border, they were taken off the train and searched. Despite having authorisation from the Soviet censor, Glavlit, all Serge's papers, and copies of the novels written in Orenburg, were confiscated. They have not been recovered to this day.

Serge and his family were given asylum in Belgium. Within months of leaving Russia, they had been stripped of their Soviet citizenship, the Spanish Civil War had broken out, and the first of the Moscow Trials had begun. There is little doubt that had Serge still been in the Soviet Union at that point, he would never have got out alive.

The Spanish Civil War and the Soviet Terror were to form the focus of Serge's political activity in Belgium and, later, when he moved to Paris. There he became the representative of the Spanish P.O.U.M., and a leading figure in the Committee of Inquiry into the Moscow Trials.

On reaching Belgium, one of his first acts had been to re-establish contact with Trotsky, then in exile in Norway. At first relations were warm, and Serge undertook to translate Trotsky's 'Revolution Betrayed' into French. But political differences, exaggerated by the atmosphere of conspiracy and mutual suspicion in which they had to work, soon became apparent.

Serge criticised Trotsky for sectarianism, and his attempt to build a new international with no more than a few small groups. Trotsky, for his part, deplored Serge's support for the P.O.U.M., and his uncritical attitude to many individuals on the left.

By this time Liuba's condition was incurable. With the threat of war hanging over Europe, Serge was forced to put her in a home. Later he was married again, to his third wife, Laurette.

In 1940, the Nazi occupation of Paris forced Serge, along with thousands of other refugees, to flee south. In Marseilles, He was assisted by Varian Fry's American Relief Committee, and for several months in the winter of 1940/41, he, Laurette & Vlady lived in a large villa just outside the city, where their companions included Andre Breton. Finally he was able to get a visa for Mexico, and left Europe on one of the last ships to sail. On the voyage, he held a meeting with his comrades.

Serge lived out his last years in isolation and great poverty. He had few close companions, and many of the younger Spanish revolutionary exiles were hostile to him. He was fascinated by Mexico, in particular the landscape and the culture, but never felt at home there. His interest in geology - a passion of his father - was re-awakened by the elemental forces which were never far below the surface, and in 1943 he witnessed the birth of the volcano of Paricutin.

Despite the near impossibility of getting anything published, he continued to write, and produced some of his greatest works 'for the desk drawer'. He completed his Memoirs, and what is perhaps his finest novel, "The Case of Comrade Tulayev", both of which had been started in Europe. He wrote two further novels - "The Long Dusk", about the fall of France and its effect on political refugees, and "Les Annees sans Pardon", set in Paris, Leningrad, Berlin and Mexico, the story of disillusioned GPU agents faced with the impossibility of escape. Almost his last work was to collaborate with Trotsky's widow, Natalia, on a biography of the great revolutionary whom he still admired so much, despite their differences.

He died of a heart attack in a Mexico City taxi on Monday 17th of November 1947, before he could even tell the driver where he was going. One of his closest friends during those last few years, Julian Gorkin, describes his corpse:

"His upturned soles had holes in them, his suit was threadbare, his shirt coarse. Really he might have been some vagabond or other picked up from the streets. His face was stiffened in an expression of ironic protest and, by means of a bandage of cloth, the State had at last closed his mouth."

Victor Serge - the Incomparable Witness

The writer and revolutionary Victor Serge was born in Brussels in 1890, the son of Russian political exiles. He died in 1947, himself a political exile in Mexico. By turns anarchist, syndicalist, Bolshevik, Left Oppositionist and independently minded socialist, Serge's whole life was characterised by political struggle against capitalism, and later against Stalinism as well. Apart from a short period as a leading official in the Comintern, he remained outside established political hierarchies, generally suspicious of the organisations he joined and deeply jealous of both his freedom of thought and his right to criticise. As a consequence he spent ten years in captivity, and many more as a refugee.

Serge is known today principally through a handful of books - the autobiographical "Memoirs of a Revolutionary" and novels such as "The Case of Comrade Tulayev". These form just a small part of his output which includes nine novels (two still missing), as well as an early history of the Russian Revolution and a mass of booklets and articles on history, politics and art, often written under extremely difficult conditions. Most are marked by the honesty and integrity for which he always strove, and which makes him such an outstanding witness of the post revolutionary period in the USSR. But Serge deserves to be remembered not just for what he wrote but for what he did and what he believed. In particular his humanist vision of socialism is, I believe, especially relevant in this post-Stalinist era.

Three years ago I began research on Serge for a film for Channel Four. That film has yet to be made, but in the course of the research we met and interviewed many of those who had known Serge during his lifetime, including both his son Vlady and daughter Jeannine, relatives and political comrades in Russia, and friends and acquaintances in both France and Mexico. This talk will be based largely on their testimony and will seek to reveal some of the lesser known and more personal aspects of Serge's life.

It will focus on two periods, in part for reasons of time, but also because they are of particular interest and there is substantial first hand evidence. The first covers his arrest and subsequent exile in Orenburg (1933-36); the second his final years in Mexico (1941-47). This latter period is one of the least known (it is not covered in the Memoirs), and is notable for the development of his ideas and for the more personal tone of much of his writings.