

Victor Serge's Political Testament

By Richard Greeman

“What would be Victor Serge’s political position if he were alive today?” During the sixty-odd years since Serge’s untimely death, this question—a priori unanswerable—has been asked (and answered) many times—on occasion, as we shall see, by self-interested politicians and pundits. The consensus among these postmortem prophets is that this hypothetical posthumous Serge would have moved to the right, along with ex-Communists like Arthur Koestler and the so-called “New York intellectuals” around the *Partisan Review*. It is of course impossible to prove otherwise. Yet the fact remains that throughout the Cold War neither the CIA-sponsored Congress for Cultural Freedom nor any other conservative anti-Communist group ever attempted to exploit Serge’s writings, which continued to speak far too revolutionary a language and remained largely out of print. Nonetheless, the specter of an undead right-wing Serge continues to haunt the critics, and there are reasons why.

Ironically, the first accusation of “abandoning Marxism” came from Leon Trotsky, whose ideas Serge had defended at great risk in the USSR and continued to propagate in exile as Trotsky’s translator and through his own books. As the reader of these *Memoirs* is aware, in the late ’30s Serge and Trotsky had political differences over Kronstadt, the Cheka, and the POUM, and in 1938 Trotsky unjustly (on the basis of an article he hadn’t read¹) portrayed Serge as abandoning Marxism along with Stalinism and drifting to the

1. Victor Serge, “Marxism in Our Time,” *Partisan Review* 5, 3 (August–September 1938): 26–32. Serge vigorously defends Marxism in this article, and there is reason to believe that the source of Trotsky’s misinformation was the Stalinist double-agent in Paris, Etienne.

Right.² Ignoring these attacks, Serge continued loyally to defend Trotsky to his death, helped expose Trotsky's murderer, and collaborated with Trotsky's widow, Natalia Sedova, on *The Life and Death of Leon Trotsky*. Yet generations of Trotskyists have reflexively handed down Trotsky's caricature of Serge as a "bridge from revolution to reaction"—an accusation apparently confirmed by the myth of Serge deathbed conversion to Gaullism.

In January 1948, a few weeks after Serge's death, that great con-fabulator André Malraux launched a macabre press campaign claiming Serge as a convert to Gaullism.³ The sad fact is that six days before he died, Serge had sent a grossly flattering personal letter to Malraux, begging the support of de Gaulle's once and future Minister of Culture (and influential Gallimard editor) to publish his novel *Les Derniers temps* in France.⁴ Desperate to leave the political isolation and the (fatally) unhealthy altitude of Mexico for Paris, Serge indulged in an uncharacteristic *ruse de guerre*, feigning sympathy for Malraux's political position (according to his son Vladimir, at the latter's urging). Serge's ruse backfired. His letter and the news of his death reached Paris simultaneously, and Malraux seized the moment by printing selected excerpts—and leaking them to C. L. Sulzberger, who published them in *The New York Times*—thus recruiting Serge's fresh corpse into the ranks of the Western anti-Communist crusade.⁵

Aside from this private letter, there is zero evidence in Serge's po-

2. See Richard Greeman, "Opposition Within the Opposition Victor Serge and Leon Trotsky—Relations 1936–1940," in *Beware of Vegetarian Sharks*, Praxis, NY, 2012.

3. Peter Sedgwick analyzed this incident in detail in "Victor Serge and Gaullism," appended to the original 1963 Oxford edition of *Memoirs* on which we have in part based our summary.

4. The topic of Serge's novel occupies two-thirds of the original typescript letter, a photocopy of which was made available to me in 1990 by Florence Malraux, the writer's daughter.

5. C. L. Sulzberger, "Europe's Anti-Red Trend Inspiring Strange Tie-Ups: New Coalitions Courting Leftist Support to Bring Workers into Pale," *The New York Times*, February 14, 1948.

litical writings, published and unpublished,⁶ of sympathy for Gaullism or Western anti-Communism—quite the contrary. In 1946, Serge sharply criticized his comrade René Lefevvre, editor of the far-left review *Masses*, for publishing an attack on the USSR by an American anti-Communist: “If the Soviet regime is to be criticized,” wrote Serge, “let it be from a socialist and working-class point of view. If we must let American voices be heard, let them be those of sincere democrats and friends of peace, and not chauvinistic demagogues; let them be those of the workers who will succeed one day, we hope, in organizing themselves into an independent party.” A few months later, Serge followed up: “I understand that the Stalinist danger alarms you. But it must not make us lose sight of our overall view. We must not play into the hands of an anti-Communist bloc [...] We shall get nowhere if we seem more preoccupied with criticizing Stalinism than with defending the working class. The reactionary danger is still there, and in practice we shall often have to act alongside the Communists.”⁷

More recently Serge’s projected posthumous rightward drift has been alleged on the basis of his guilt by association with erstwhile U.S. leftists and socialists who indeed subsequently moved right. This argument also ignores the fact Serge’s main political associations were in Europe. In any case, we must remember that in Mexico Serge lived by his pen (like Marx in exile, who wrote for Horace Greeley’s *New York Herald Tribune*), writing news articles in English for the social democratic press (the staunchly anti-Communist *Call* and *New Leader*) as well as think pieces for *Partisan Review* (whose editors had supported his struggles to survive in Vichy France and Mexico). Many of these New York intellectuals did indeed move to the right, beginning with James Burnham in the 1940s. Thus Serge, it is argued, “would have”

6. Serge’s manuscripts and correspondence (1940–47) are available at the Yale University Library. Catalogue on line under “Serge Papers.”

7. Quoted from Ian Birchall, “Letters from Victor Serge to René Lefevvre,” *Revolutionary History* 8, 3 (2002).

moved right too. Yet not long before he died, Serge vigorously attacked Burnham, writing:

The paradox that he has developed, doubtless out of love for a provocative theory, is as false as it is dangerous. Under a thousand insipid forms it is to be found in the Press and the literature of this age of preparation for the Third World War. The reactionaries have an obvious interest in confounding Stalinist totalitarianism—exterminator of the Bolsheviks—with Bolshevism itself; their aim is to strike at the working class, at Socialism, at Marxism, even at Liberalism...

All this would be just a sad footnote were it not for the posthumous image, based on the old Gaullism and “New York intellectual” arguments, of a right-wing Serge that was still being agitated as late as 2010.⁸ To lay this ghost to rest once and for all, let us quote Serge’s last significant political statement, generally considered his “political testament.” “Thirty Years After the Russian Revolution” was dated August 1947 and published in Paris by *La Révolution prolétarienne* in November 1947, the month of his death. There Serge writes:

A feeble logic—pointing an accusing finger at the dark spectacle of the Stalinist Soviet Union—deduces from this the bankruptcy of Bolshevism, hence that of Marxism, hence that of Socialism [...] Aren’t you forgetting the other bankruptcies? Where was Christianity during the recent social catastrophes? What happened to Liberalism? What did Conservatism—enlightened or reactionary—produce? Did it not give us Mussolini, Hitler, Salazar, and Franco? If it was a question of honestly weighing the many failures of different

8. See James Hoberman, “Orphan of History,” *The New York Review of Books* (October 22, 2010).

ideologies, we would have our work cut out for us for a long time. And it is far from over...

As far as capitalism is concerned, Serge concluded:

There is no longer any doubt that the era of stable, growing, relatively pacific capitalism came to an end with the First World War. The Marxist revolutionaries who announced the opening of a global revolutionary era—and said that if socialism did not establish itself in at least the great European powers, another period of barbarism and a “cycle of wars of war and revolution” (as Lenin put it, quoting Engels) would follow—were right. The conservatives, the evolutionists, and the reformists who chose to believe in the future bourgeois Europe carefully cut into pieces at Versailles, then replastered at Locarno, and fed with phrases dug up at the League of Nations—are today remembered as statesmen of blind policies....

The Marxist revolutionaries of the Bolshevik school awaited and worked toward the social transformation of Europe and the world by an awakening of the working masses and by the rational and equitable reorganization of a new society. They expected to continue working toward the time when men would take control over their own destinies. There they made a mistake—they were beaten. Instead, the transformation of the world is taking place amidst a terrible confusion of institutions, movements, and beliefs without the hoped-for clarity of vision, without a sense of renewed humanism, and in a way that now imperils all the values and hopes of men. Nevertheless the general trends are still those defined by the socialists of 1917–20 toward the collectivization and the planification of economies, the internationalization of the world, the emancipation of oppressed and colonized peoples, and the formation of mass-based democracies of a new kind. The alternative was also foreseen

by the socialists: barbarism and war, war and barbarism—a monster with two heads.⁹

As Peter Sedgwick put it in 1963: “Whatever else they may be, these are not the words of a man of the Right, or of any variety of ex-revolutionary penitent.”

June 2012

9. Serge, *Russia Twenty Years After* (*Destin d'une Revolution*, 1937), Max Shactman, Tr. (Includes “Thirty Years After the Russian Revolution,” 1947), Humanities Press, N.J., 1996.