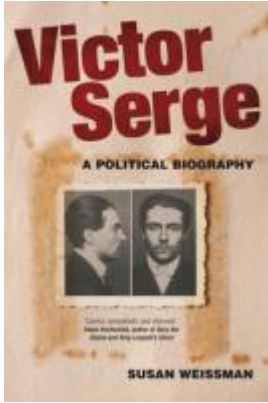


VICTOR SERGE: CONSCIENCE OF THE REVOLUTION

January 30, 2014



Susan Weissman. *Victor Serge: A Political Biography*. New York: Verso, 2013. Notes. Biographical glossary. Bibliography. Index. 452 pages.

From its opening pages Susan Weissman's *Victor Serge: A Political Biography* thrusts us into the life of this remarkable revolutionary and writer as he plunges into the Russian Revolution with all of its contradictions. Weissman has written a wonderful intellectual and, above all, political life of Serge that focuses on his experience in the Bolshevik Party and then in the Left Opposition, explaining how he attempted to understand and express through his journalism, essays, histories, memoir, novels and poems the meaning of it all as the workers' revolution first faltered and was then transformed into the Stalinist regime. Weissman's *Victor Serge* takes up virtually all of the major incidents, issues, and personalities of the revolution during the 1920s and 1930s, giving particular attention to Serge's coincidences and differences with Leon Trotsky.

Originally published by Verso in 2002 as *Victor Serge: The Course is Set on Hope*, this new paperback edition with a new title, a new preface, and 50 pages of supplemental material in the form of a biographical glossary, only became available this past June. Weissman has produced a book where scholarship based both on the archives and on the social history of the revolution joins with her passion for the subject matter and with Serge's and her own socialist politics to produce a remarkably stimulating book. For anyone interested in the history the Russian Revolution, the Bolshevik Party, and the Soviet Union, and in their significance for the questions of the past and future of the socialist movement, this book is a must read. Through it we enter into Serge's central political preoccupations, the concerns of an anarchist turned Bolshevik: What is the relationship between a revolutionary workers' movement and the party and leaders at the head of it? How do adverse economic and political developments shape both the movement and the party? What is the responsibility of the individual revolutionary in the defense of the revolution both from its external enemies and from its own internal dynamics tending toward authoritarianism? How can we in a process as powerful and violent as a revolution preserve its foundations in the solidarity of the underdogs as well as its humanist ideals and goals?

Serge's life experience embodies and exemplifies that of the European revolutionary socialist movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The son of exiled Russian revolutionary parents who had been involved with the Narodnik or Peoples' Will Party, Serge was born Victor Lvovich Kibalchich in Brussels in 1890. As a teenager, he joined the Socialist Young Guard in Belgium, but in search of a more radical politics and lifestyle became an anarchist and editor of the weekly *Anarchie* published in Paris. In 1913, though he himself was not involved in crime or violence, because of his anarchist convictions and refusal to desert his comrades, he was

convicted in the famous trial of the anarchist Bonnot gang and sentenced to five years in a French prison. Released in 1917, he was expelled from France and joined the revolutionary syndicalist movement in Barcelona where he participated in preparations for the uprising that took place there later that year. Back in France, he was arrested and held for more than a year in a French concentration camp as a suspected Bolshevik. At the end of World War I he was traded by the French government for a French officer held in Russia, and so in late 1918 arrived in his parents' homeland.

In Soviet Russia Serge joined the Bolshevik or Communist Party, worked for the Soviet government, and fought in the civil war. With his knowledge of several European languages and extraordinary writing skills, he went to work for the Communist International or Comintern as a political analyst, writer and journalist serving in Berlin and Vienna. When he returned to Russia in 1925 he joined Trotsky in the Left Opposition but, after Stalin's victory in the fight over party leadership, Serge was expelled from the Communist Party in 1928. During the Stalinist terror that expanded and became more intense between 1928 and 1936, Serge was arrested and jailed twice, once held in solitary confinement for 85 days in the Lubyanka Prison and eventually sent to the Orenburg *gulag* near Kazakhstan where he lived with his son Vlady. Finally freed from the Orenburg concentration camp by campaigns organized by European writers, artists, and intellectuals, he returned to France in 1936. When the Nazis invaded France in 1940, Serge and Vlady narrowly escaped and after many difficulties eventually reached Mexico where he lived and worked until his death in 1947. Throughout all of these years Serge remained remarkably productive, writing several novels, histories, and many essays dedicated to understanding and analyzing the progress and regress of the Russian Revolution and the revolutionary movement more generally.

Weissman follows the adventure of Serge's life and the evolution of his thinking particularly after he became involved in the Bolshevik Party and then in the Left Opposition that opposed the rise and consolidation of Joseph Stalin's bureaucratic counter-revolution in the Soviet Union. While Leon Trotsky was the leader of the Opposition, Serge was no mere follower, developing his own critique of the degeneration of the Bolshevik Party and the Soviet State. Throughout the 1920s and well into the 1930s, Serge was the principal translator of Trotsky's workers into French and for many Western Europeans who were sympathetic to the Opposition, he was, after Trotsky himself, the best known writer and analyst of developments in the Communist movement. During those years Stalin crushed the Left Opposition in the Soviet Union, while the Soviet GPU, the secret police, infiltrated the Opposition and pursued and assassinated Opposition leaders in Europe. Trotsky, giving up on the idea of changing the direction of the Communist International and the Communist Parties, brought together his small groups of followers and launched the Fourth International in 1938. By then the positions of Trotsky and Serge had so diverged that it was impossible for them to collaborate. Trotsky's criticized Serge scathingly in public and even more viciously in the inner circles of the opposition.

Serge differed with Trotsky on a whole series of issues going back to the early days of the revolution, differences that in the context of the Spanish Civil War and the founding of the Fourth International took on greater significance. One of those debates dealt with the old issues of the Kronstadt Rebellion of February 1921. Trotsky, as a leader of the Bolshevik Party shared responsibility for the violent suppression of the rebellion, though he had had no personal hand in it. Both Trotsky and Serge agreed that the rebellion had had to be stopped and suppressed because it opened the door to counter-revolution in Russia. But, while Serge saw the Kronstadt rebels' program as representing the "beginning of a fresh, liberating revolution for popular democracy," Trotsky argued that "the Kronstadt uprising was nothing but an armed reaction of the petty bourgeoisie against the hardships of social revolution and the severity of the proletarian dictatorship." [Serge, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, translated by Peter Sedgwick (London: Writers and Readers, 1984) and Trotsky, "Hue

and Cry Over Kronstadt.”]

The differences on Kronstadt paralleled their differences over the role of the degeneration of the Bolshevik Party and the Soviet government. Serge, as Weissman shows, saw the beginning of the degeneration and the slide toward totalitarianism in the establishment of the Cheka and the death penalty as early as 1921. Trotsky disagreed on the role of the Cheka in that period and would date the degeneration of the party several years later, nor would he share Serge’s libertarian critique of the Bolshevik-Soviet government.

The Trotsky-Serge disputes over Kronstadt and the Cheka were driven by their differences in the late 1930s over the Spanish Civil War and the establishment of the Fourth International. As the Spanish civil war and potential revolution unfolded, Serge supported the Workers Party of Marxist Unification, the POUM, a fusion of left and right Communists, while Trotsky criticized it for a variety of reasons but most importantly for joining the Popular Front government in Catalonia. Serge was also much more sympathetic than Trotsky to Catalonia’s mostly anarchist labor movement, which also ultimately joined the Popular Front.

Those differences over Spain were in turn related to the question of Trotsky’s call for the establishment of a Fourth International. Serge believed that a new International could only be created by real revolutionary working class parties in a few important countries—and there were none. Trotsky was determined that his Left Opposition groups, most of them mere handfuls of young intellectuals, could issue the call for and go on to construct a Fourth International as a new party of world revolution. Trotsky, with his usual will and fervor fought fiercely for the creation of the Fourth International organized around his programmatic ideas. As many of his former collaborators, including his own son Leon Sedov, noted, throughout these years Trotsky became more rigid, dogmatic, intolerant and authoritarian toward both his friends and his critics in the anti-Stalinist left, making a genuine discussion of the issues among those in the revolutionary left and particularly in the Trotskyist circles more difficult.

My own view on these debates, I must confess, sometimes coincides with Trotsky but at other times leans toward Serge. Trotsky’s logic is often completely convincing, though Serge’s ethical stand is often more compelling to me. While understanding Trotsky’s belief that the workers’ movement needed a new revolutionary leadership as an alternative to Social Democracy and Stalinism, Serge was certainly right that one could not create a new Fourth International out of the tiny, inexperienced, and generally isolated Trotskyist groups in Western Europe and the United States. The Fourth International never became a real international of working class parties and soon split into rival factions most made up of small revolutionary currents in various countries. On the question of the POUM in Spain, while I agree in general with Trotsky’s critique of the Popular Front and I recognize the POUM’s participation in the Catalan Popular Front—it’s leader Andrés Nin became Minister of Justice—compromised its position as an independent force, yet it is also the case that the small party attempted in the labor and social movements to maintain a critical and independent posture vis-à-vis the government of Lluís Companys while taking advantage of the opportunity to expand its presence and recruit. This was a strategy that ultimately failed, as Trotsky predicted, though it is not at all clear that the POUM’s independence from the government would have been any more successful given the balance of forces.

On the question of the degeneration of the Bolshevik Party, Trotsky and Serge—though they existed in the same Opposition—tended in their responses to the critical situation in Soviet Russia in the 1920s to differ in their approaches, Trotsky generally focusing on influencing the party leadership (at least until 1929), while Serge wished to find a way somehow to not only reestablish democracy within the party, but also in working class, and the broader society. Serge was willing in 1923-24 to consider the possibility of a coalition government in Russia—though one wonders who could possibly

have formed such a coalition—something Trotsky could never have accepted. Finally, Trotsky and Serge differed on the nature of the Soviet Union in the late 1930s; the former calling it a “degenerated workers’ state” while the latter described it as “bureaucratic totalitarianism with collectivist leanings.” Yet, both thought it was necessary to carry out a new revolution in Soviet Russia to bring workers back to power. Even today, many decades later, the debates between Trotsky and Serge, the issues they raised, seem difficult to resolve, and so it is perhaps best just to say that we place ourselves in that tradition of revolutionary, democratic, and international socialism that they both exemplified.

The assassination of Trotsky by a Stalinist agent in Mexico in August 1940 ended the debate between the two men, though Serge, who had also found refuge in Mexico, would go on analyzing the political situation and the possibilities of the left until his death in November 1947. He died leaving a legacy of important socialist histories, memoirs, and wonderful novels. Those interested in Serge’s final years will find interesting the “Mexican Notebooks: 1940-47” published in *New Left Review* 82 (July/August) 2013. We read there what may have been Serge’s last appreciation of Bolshevism. He writes:

5 December 1941. Bolshevism as a tremendous human achievement. The course of some sixty years had created a numerous revolutionary intelligentsia, constituting a unique achievement up till now in the modern world. Its general characteristics: a capacity for conviction, a unity of thought, action and life; personality, not individualism; social awareness, energy, capacity for sacrifice and hunger for victory.

Serge himself can be placed within this tradition, while at the same time its critic and its conscience.