

CONQUERED CITY

VICTOR SERGE

*Translated from the French and with
a foreword by*

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TRANSLATOR'S FOREWORD

VICTOR SERGE led one of the most remarkable lives of the twentieth century. The child of Russian revolutionary exiles, Victor Lvovich Kibalchich (Serge was a pseudonym) was born in Brussels in 1890, grew up in poverty, and became a professional militant and pamphleteer in his teens. A stateless exile and internationalist from birth, Serge was a participant-witness at crucial turning points in world revolutionary history, including the 1911 trial of the “tragic bandits” of French anarchism, the 1917 syndicalist uprising in Barcelona, the 1919–1921 Russian Civil War (the setting of *Conquered City*), the aborted 1921 German Revolution, the Left Opposition’s battle against Stalinism, the fight against Fascism and Stalinism in pre–World War II France and Spain, and the beginnings of the French Resistance in Marseille. Hounded by the police of Vichy France, Serge was granted a precarious exile to Mexico where, in 1947, he died in poverty, still persecuted by Stalin’s GPU. Serge had spent eleven of his fifty-seven years in various forms of captivity and left nothing but a couple of threadbare suits, a battered typewriter, and three unpublished masterpieces.

Serge’s importance as a witness to the events of his time has long been recognized, but his literary genius has yet to receive its due. Along with a dozen books of political reportage, Serge was the author of a book of poetry, a remarkable autobiography,¹ and seven surviving

1. Serge, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary: 1901–1941*, translated by Peter Sedgwick (London: Oxford University Press, 1963). In 2012 NYRB Classics will publish the first uncut and annotated English translation of Serge’s *Memoirs*.

novels.² His fiction falls naturally into two cycles. The “cycle of revolution” consists of the novels written in semi-captivity in Stalinist Russia: *Men in Prison* (1930), *Birth of Our Power* (1931), *Conquered City* (1932), and the two lost novels, *Les hommes perdus* and *La Tourmente* (1933–36). The “cycle of resistance” comprises the novels written in exile, where Serge was free to depict Soviet life under Stalin: *Midnight in the Century* (1939), *The Long Dusk* (1946), and the posthumous *Case of Comrade Tulayev* (1951) and *Unforgiving Years* (1971). Innovative in form, rich in imagery and descriptive power, sweeping in its moral vision, Serge’s fictional oeuvre re-creates the atmosphere of a whole epoch of revolutionary hopes and tragedies.

A Tragic Novel of Revolutionary Terror

Conquered City, written in Leningrad³ in 1931 and sent off in sections for publication in Paris, is the starkest and darkest of Serge’s early novels. Given its subject, that is only appropriate. *Conquered City* is about the Terror: the Red Terror and the White—but mainly the Red. His protagonists are idealistic Socialists who have dared to pick up the weapons of power—guns, jails, executions, spies, police—on the gamble that by wielding them with purity, in a righteous cause, they can save the city and put an end to the need for terror, perhaps forever. *La Terreur* was one of the novel’s working titles because “terror is *par excellence* the weapon of the revolution at bay, victorious and crushed by the weight of its victory,” as Serge wrote in 1931 to his mentor Marcel Martinet.⁴

2. The manuscripts of two completed novels were seized by the Russian secret police in 1936. I have translated five of the surviving seven into English, including most recently *Unforgiving Years* (New York Review Books Classics, 2008).

3. Originally, and once again, St. Petersburg. During World War I the name of Peter the Great’s capital was Russified into “Petrograd,” the “conquered city” of Serge’s novel.

4. A “proletarian” poet, editor, and militant, Martinet was an early supporter of the Russian Revolution and served as cultural editor of the French Communist daily,

Serge's protagonists who wield the weapons of terror know they are doomed, one way or another. *Conquered City* opens on a frosty night in 1919 in the guardroom of the Petrograd Special Commission (or Cheka)⁵ and closes precisely one year later in the same locale with the identical evocation of a frosty night. Within this dramatic time and space, a double-ended action transpires: First, the city is saved. The collective protagonist—on the verge of succumbing to fatigue, cold, hunger, disease, poverty, popular discontent, treason within the gates, the powerful enemy outside—rouses itself to one final heroic effort at survival in order to keep open the possibility of a less brutal future. Second, in the process, the collective hero, the Party, is all but destroyed—devoured by the task, overwhelmed by its contradictions, betrayed by its own scruples.

The novel is tragic in both spirit and form, bearing ready comparison to Sophocles' *Oedipus the Tyrant*. Both are dramatic "detective stories" in which a hero, having previously saved the city and become its ruler, again attempts to track down evildoers and purge the city of pollution. By a twist of fate, this purge of the city leads to the hero's self-discovery and self-punishment. Sophocles' King Oedipus had won power by saving Thebes through an act of intellectual heroism, answering the riddle of the Sphinx and destroying her power over the city. Now, faced with a new crisis within the city, the very virtues that enabled Oedipus's original success—unflinching

L'Humanité, during the 1920s. He broke with the Stalinized French Communist Party and later joined the successful campaign to liberate Serge from captivity in Russia. Martinet was Serge's literary interlocutor in France during the composition of the early novels. See George Paizis, *Marcel Martinet: Poet of the Revolution* (London: Francis Boutle Publishers, 2007).

5. The Special Commission for the Combating of Counterrevolution and Sabotage, best known by its Russian acronym, Cheka. In translating Serge, I have chosen to retain the awkward official phrase because Serge, faced with the same choice in French, did likewise; also because in 1919 a Special Commission was a (supposedly temporary) committee of delegates elected to deal with an emergency situation, whereas Cheka evokes anachronistically the established institution of a permanent secret political police—GPU, NKVD, KGB—into which the Special Commissions, alas, all too rapidly evolved.

intellectual clarity combined with boldness of action—bring about the tyrant-hero's doom. Similarly, in Serge's historical novel the revolutionaries have lifted the curse of czarist oppression and taken power as a collective *tyrannos*—precisely through the exercise of unflinching (Marxist) intellectual clarity combined with (Leninist) boldness of action. Now, like Oedipus, faced with a new crisis—corruption within the walls and an enemy at the gates—Serge's collective hero will again mobilize its formidable intellect and willpower to successfully purge the city. Yet ironically, this victory will be achieved at the cost of painful self-discovery and self-punishment.

The title *Conquered City* is rich with a many layered irony. Petrograd, the “conquered city” in question, is first of all Czar Peter's city, the window on Europe conquered from the wilderness through the despotic will of a Westernizing tyrant. St. Petersburg's ascendancy over old Moscow has perennially symbolized the conquest of the old Russia by the new, of the Slavic by the European, of the mystical by the rational—and of the common people by the Empire's vast police-state bureaucracy. Peter the Great's bronze horseman broods over the grand prospects and frozen canals of Serge's cold, angular capital and haunts the meditations of the old history professor Lytaev, who stoically acquiesces in the new conquest which must necessarily seal his own doom.

It is always the barbarians who renew the world. There is so much rubbish and hidden barbarism, sickness and lies in our culture! The barbarians who have come are the product of that culture. That's why some of them are ugly and demented. They will be swept away like us, along with the old beliefs, the old images, the old poisons, money, and syphilis.

Peter's imperial city has been conquered by masses of commoners led by revolutionists, conquered from within—or, rather, from below. Her elegant palaces, gigantic factories, and ubiquitous administrative offices are occupied by ragged soldiers, half-starved workmen, and intellectuals in shabby émigré suits. Further irony: this fragile

conquest is itself under immediate peril of reconquest. White armies, well supplied by the conservative Western democracies, are approaching the outposts of the besieged revolutionary city. Within its gates organized networks of seasoned counterrevolutionary agents, in league with the Whites outside, are organizing a “fifth column” composed of disloyal ex-aristocrats, recalcitrant bureaucrats, ruined bourgeois, greedy speculators, underworld criminals, and the bulk of the city’s bewildered, hostile middle classes.

Far from having “conquered” this imperial capital, the revolutionists are painfully conscious that they are only camping out in it, precariously perched on a pinnacle from which any fall is deadly, their shabbiness and poverty incongruous against the background of august imperial splendor. But the ironies do not end here. The revolutionists who have conquered the city, have conquered power, now find themselves conquered by power—all but overwhelmed by the problems attendant on its exercise and preservation. Serge had explored the ironic theme of victory-in-defeat in his earlier novels: *Men in Prison* (where the revolutionary, incarcerated during World War I, triumphs inwardly at the thought of empires crumbling outside) and *Birth of Our Power* (where a lost revolution in Spain leads to a revolutionary victory in Russia). Here the action is one of tragic reversal (*peripeteia*), or defeat-in-victory.

Arguably, Serge’s fictional tragedy respects the classic unities of time, place, and action proposed by Aristotle’s *Poetics* as inherent to the form. *Conquered City* extends the “single day” of the tragic performance to the passage of a single year and confines the action to the stage of a single city. Moreover, as in Attic tragedy, the stage of Serge’s novel is animated by choruses who explain or comment on the action. Some of Serge’s choruses are impromptu, for example women on line for bread, whose anonymous gossip about prices, arrests, rumors, and scandals provides the reader with essential background and summary information about what is happening in the besieged city, often unbeknownst to the protagonists. Serge’s choruses are multivocal, “dialogic” in the sense articulated by his Soviet contemporary, the literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin. The extended

philosophical dialogue of Kirk and Osipov on a predawn battlefield also suggests the strophe and antistrophe of the tragic chorus.

“All these vermin whom we are using, whom we are making work for us, who are necessary to us, who carry out a million tasks with us, necessary ones, I know—won’t they end up by devouring us? Aren’t they gnawing away at us as they obey us?”

Kirk stopped talking. He had before him the dry face of Osipov, who was leaning back against a tree trunk. In the distance the countryside was emerging from the mist.

“Devoured or not,” said Osipov, “the important thing is to make ourselves useful: to do what must be done. . . . Today they serve us. Afterward, we will try to rid the earth of them; first, let’s win. All weapons are good. Don’t take me literally: all weapons are not good at every moment. All means do not lead to an end; an end demands specific means; the choice of weapons depends on the objectives of the struggle.”

In Serge’s novel tragic irony completes and complicates heroic action, and fiction rises to the level of epic tragedy. *Conquered City* gives us the clash of armies, the fate of cities and empires, an action of great moral seriousness entwined with the fate of heroic and essentially good, if flawed (that is, mistaken) individuals. Running throughout are the tragic themes of fate—here incarnated in its Marxist form as historical necessity—and of man’s freedom, incarnated in the will of the revolutionists to *change life*. The protagonists, in their agony, attain high levels of self-awareness and moral consciousness.

This is also true of the antagonists, the White terrorists, Danil and Nikita, whom Serge portrays with sympathy and stunning insight.

Nikita thought about forests. Last year he had walked for five weeks through the forests of the Dvina, sometimes following the trails of great hungry bears through the fresh snow, listen-

ing to the wolves howling at sundown, resting under the pines in the awful cold, building himself a fire as a rare treat (a dangerous treat, for fire could attract man), learning how to devour the raw flesh of wolves and crows. The silence of the forest was so immense that it seemed to cover the whole earth, to blot out all memory. . . . Now he no longer knew whether it had been a nightmare or a rare burst of sunlight in his life.

Did Serge consciously pour his twentieth-century modernist novel into an ancient literary mold? Certainly he was making a conscious reference to Homer and Virgil when he began the final chapter of *Conquered City* with the line: “There were funerals and celebrations.” “I have always proceeded from an idea of the revolution whose greatness is tragic,” noted Serge about the composition of *Conquered City*. Arguably, his conscious purpose in writing his novel was consistent with the therapeutic purpose of tragedy according to Aristotle, whose *Poetics* defines this function as *catharsis*: the *polis*—the body politic—is restored to health by “purging” it of fear and awe during the tragic performance. Writing in 1930 when the body politic of international Communism was already sickened with the Russian disease of Stalinism, Serge dedicated *Conquered City* to his “comrades in France and Spain” in order to “purge our strength . . . the better to accomplish what must be accomplished.” To effect this catharsis, Serge believed it was necessary for literature to “rescue the true face of the Revolution from oblivion and legend.” Thus for Serge the truth of poetics may be said to absorb and transcend the truth of politics.

The Writing of Conquered City

Serge wrote *Conquered City* more than a decade after the events it describes. He himself had been an active participant-eyewitness in the besieged city’s defense, and like his protagonists, he could have been observed in 1919 dragging a heavy rifle through nightly house

searches; haranguing sullen, demoralized workers in a factory; planning the city's evacuation; working in the files of the former czarist secret police; teaching political-education classes; organizing clandestine contraband traffic with Finland; participating in late-night meetings with the Party's top leadership in the former Hotel Astoria. Serge was privy to the incident on which he based the novel's "plot," such as it is. The vivid thumbnail sketches of Zinoviev and Dzerzhinsky⁶ drawn by Serge in his *Memoirs* make it easy to identify the historical models for some of the anonymous protagonists of *Conquered City*, and at one point the Serge of 1919 actually takes the stage and delivers a first-person "period" monologue (quoting his own contemporary Civil War writings for atmosphere).⁷

By 1930–31, the revolutionary hopes that sustain *Conquered City*'s protagonists had proven illusory, and apprehensions about creeping bureaucratization and revolutionary conformism had been realized. Serge's heroic depiction of the young Revolution in crisis is thus suffused with the historical irony of hindsight—much as the spectators of ancient tragedy, knowing how the stories of Agamemnon or Oedipus would end, experienced fear and awe through the lens of historical irony. Indeed, Serge's personal situation was one of ironic reversal: by dint of his loyalty to the Revolution in its purity, he was being persecuted as a "counterrevolutionary."

Serge wrote *Conquered City* under the most difficult conditions. Expelled from the Party and arrested after Stalin's 1928 victory over the Opposition, Serge was released after weeks of interrogation when his arrest caused a scandal in Paris. He remained technically "free" but lived as a virtual un-person: followed everywhere, spied on even

6. In *Conquered City* Zinoviev, Serge's boss in the Communist International, is recognizable by his flabbiness, weak will, and wild hair. In 1919 he was the Communist boss of Petrograd, and is referred to in the novel as "the dictator" or "the President" (of the Northern District). The incorruptible Felix Dzerzhinsky was the model for "the chief" or "the big chief" of the Cheka in Moscow, to whom the case of Arkadi, the wayward Chekist, is referred.

7. See Serge, *Revolution in Danger*, translated by Ian Birchall (London: Redwords, 1997).

in his collective apartment, his family harassed by GPU agents, shunned by associates, living from hand to mouth, never knowing when he might be arrested again. As he wrote to Marcel Martinet in August 1930: “I totally lack atmosphere. So I must work in a solitude so total that I can’t describe it and you couldn’t conceive it. It oppresses me never to be able to consult anyone, to hear a living voice, discuss an idea or a text. Only my old prisoner’s habits allow me to work like this. And so I continue . . .”

His goal in writing *Conquered City*, he wrote to Martinet in 1930, was to “reconstitute with the greatest accuracy and precision the atmosphere of one period of the Russian Revolution. . . . In *Conquest* [another of the novel’s working titles], I would like to dramatize the conflict of that power grappling with history and itself—and victorious.” Serge went on to outline for Martinet his plan for this new novel which he believes will be “radically different” in its form compared to

any I have read. . . . It will have a sort of plot, central if you will, but like a narrow thread running through a complicated design. . . . It is not a novel of a handful of people but that of a city, which is itself a moment and a fragment of the revolution. I keep rather close to history—without writing history—and chronicle, but above all concerned with showing the men who make events and who are carried away by events. From this standpoint, the characters have but a subaltern importance, they appear and disappear as they do in the city without occupying the center of the stage for more than a few instants.

In another letter to Martinet he reflected ruefully: “Despite all my efforts, my writing must take on the rather heavy style of an exile or a prisoner under these conditions. But don’t think for a minute that I have made my peace with this.” The samizdat conditions under which Serge was obliged to work led him to write *Conquered City*—like its predecessors, *Men in Prison* and *Birth of Our Power*—in a particular episodic form.

I had to struggle bitterly for my family's daily bread, in a society where all doors were closed to me, and where people were often afraid to shake my hand in the street. I asked myself every day, without any special emotion, but engrossed by the problem of rent, my wife's health, my son's education, whether I would not be arrested in the night. For my books I adopted an appropriate form: I had to construct them in detached fragments which could each be separately completed and sent abroad post-haste which could, if absolutely necessary, be published as they were, incomplete, and it would have been difficult for me to compose in any other form.⁸

Indeed, each chapter of *Conquered City* is a set-piece which could easily stand alone as a sketch or short story.

Serge may have composed in "detached fragments" for expediency, but they come together to form a whole greater than its parts, with its own implacable unity. The semiautonomous sketches of *Conquered City* add up to a dynamic, dramatic presentation of a year in a great city under siege, torn within by the struggle between revolution and counterrevolution. The various chapters present the reader with a series of tableaux depicting a mass meeting of workers on the verge of despair and revolt in a giant idle factory, a railway station overflowing with refugees, Chekists working late at night at the Hotel Astoria, a section of a Civil War battlefield at dawn, a bourgeois apartment house, a nest of Oriental anarchist bandits, a prison packed with the innocent and the guilty awaiting death. The reader soon begins to recognize some of the characters as they recur in different contexts, as people do in a turbulent city, and slowly realizes that these characters, unbeknownst to one another, are being drawn together in a web of intrigue leading to catastrophe. This web ramifies through random encounters such as happen in big-city life, even more so in the narrowed life of a besieged city cut off from the world.

8. Serge, *Memoirs*.

Serge and the Twentieth-Century Novel

Serge's calling to the literary vocation had all the classic earmarks of a conversion experience, marked by symbolic death, rebirth, and testimony. First came "political death": his 1929 expulsion from the Russian Communist Party as unrepentant member of the Left Opposition, followed by arrest and imprisonment. Released after seven or eight weeks from Moscow's notorious Lubyanka prison subsequent to vigorous protests by well-known pro-Soviet writers in France, Serge had a brush with physical death. Struck down by severe abdominal pains, he spent twenty-four hours "face to face with the Grim Reaper" in a Leningrad hospital. At one point his feverish delirium was interrupted by a moment of "rich and tranquil inner lucidity." As he recalled in his *Memoirs*: "I reflected that I had laboured, struggled, and learned an enormous amount, without producing anything valid or lasting. I told myself, 'If I chance to survive, I must be quick and finish the books I have begun: I must write, write . . .' I thought of what I would write, and mentally sketched the plan of a series of witness-novels about these unforgettable times." The next morning the doctor told him he would live. "I had made a decision, and that is how I became a writer."

In the same passage, Serge speaks of "returning" to literature, which he had set aside upon "entering" the Revolution (one notes the religious vocabulary), and he brought a number of unique qualities to a literary vocation which had long been gestating. The home-schooled child of penniless exiled Russian revolutionary intellectuals thirsty for knowledge, he grew up reading "cheap editions of Shakespeare" and the novels of Chernyshevsky, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Korolenko, and Gorky. Indeed, he consciously placed himself "in the line of the Russian writers." A self-educated, "organic intellectual" of the working classes, Serge acquired an amazingly vast scientific and literary culture, refracted through the specifically Russian traditions of the revolutionary *intelligentsia*.

If Serge's Russian soul expressed itself in the purest French, he was also able to view things Russian through thoroughly Western

eyes (he was twenty-nine when he first set foot on Russian soil). Later, during his interlude in Vienna from 1923 to 1925, he studied Marx, Freud, Adler, and Firenzi, and worked on intimate terms with the two great Marxists of the era, Georg Lukács and Antonio Gramsci. Essentially a European, Serge depicts himself (in the 1935 poem “Frontier”) as a “divided man of Eurasia” (*un homme déchiré d’Eurasie*). In his attempts “to find a new path for the novel,” Serge was influenced by the French unanimist movement led by Jules Romains, whose goal was to re-create the mass life of a whole society through multi-volume *romans-fleuves* like Romains’s *Men of Good Will*, the sagas of Romain Rolland, and later Sartre’s unfinished *Roads to Freedom*. Serge was also a great admirer of Proust and especially of Joyce (both were in some ways unanimists).

Serge’s writing embraced two cultures with a mastery comparable only to that of a Conrad or a Nabokov. Receptive to every mode of poetic invention, in later life he was on intimate terms with the surrealists Breton and Péret (with whom he shared his final exile); and Octavio Paz reports that Serge was the first to reveal to him the work of Henri Michaux and Valéry Larbaud, then unknown in Mexico. Ironically, Serge’s literary cosmopolitanism and Marxist internationalism has prevented him from being domesticated into the university, where departments are divided into national literatures like Russian and French, both of which apparently ignore his work.⁹

On the Russian side of the equation, as a young man in Paris in 1910, Serge was already involved in translating (anonymously) the works of prerevolutionary Russian modernists like Artzybashev. Soon after arriving in Soviet Russia, Serge was linked with writers like Gorky (a family acquaintance), Biely, and Blok, and later the poets Yesenin and Mayakovsky. As Soviet cultural correspondent for the left-wing Paris review *Clarté*, Serge closely followed the post-

9. There have been no French university theses on Serge to date, and only two MAs dating back to the 1970s and 1990s. The Anglo-Saxons have done a little better with Bill Marshall’s splendid literary study *Victor Serge: The Uses of Dissent* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1992), and my own doctoral thesis “Victor Serge: The Making of a Novelist” (Columbia University, 1968).

revolutionary renaissance of Russian literature. He also participated in the debates about “proletarian culture” that were raging in the 1920s and ’30s and offered his own original solution in *Literature and Revolution* (1932). As opposed to Trotsky, who had argued that “proletarian literature” was an empty slogan on the rather abstract grounds that the literature of the soon-to-be achieved Socialist society would be universal and classless, Serge argued that the unhealthy stalemate of the post-1919 world revolutionary movement might be prolonged and that the proletariat, on the march or in defeat, would need its own singers, its bards—the role into which Serge had obviously cast himself.¹⁰

Western influences notwithstanding, Serge’s style as a novelist was forged in contact with the Soviet Russian literary movements of the 1920s. He translated novels by Gladkov, Shaginian, Sholokhov, Balmont, Merezhkovsky, and Tikhonov,¹¹ but the most powerful influence was no doubt Boris Pilniak, whose work Serge admired from the start and with whom he lived on intimate terms after 1928 when he was elaborating his own fiction. We can get a picture of what Serge later attempted in his own novels by reading what he thought he saw in Pilniak’s *Naked Year* back in 1923:

Pilniak’s way of writing seems bizarre at first. But in the last analysis, it is rigorously adequate to its period . . . The revolution which has broken all the old social disciplines has also broken the all-too-conventional ones of literature. No linear story-line in this Russian writer. No “plot” (what a poor thing,

10. Included in Serge, *Collected Writings on Literature and Revolution*, edited and translated by Al Richardson (London: Francis Boutle Publishers, 2004). The bourgeoisie, Trotsky contended, having grown up within feudal society, had had several centuries to educate itself and create its class literature, whereas the oppressed proletariat, in its struggle to overthrow the chains of capitalism, would have no time to assimilate high culture before it triumphed and ushered in a new social order, thus disappearing as a class. Ergo, the proletariat would not create a class literature.

11. These last three anonymously, as suggested by Jean Rièrè in his “Bibliographie,” included in *Mémoires d’un révolutionnaire et autres écrits politiques, 1908–1947* (Paris: Laffont, 2010).

what a poor word!). No unique central characters. Crowds in motion—in which each individual is a world, an end in himself—events crowding, intertwining, colliding, overriding each other, multiple lives which appear and disappear, all of them rare, unique, central, because human, all insignificant in “Russia, the Blizzard, the Revolution,” for only what remains counts and that is the country, the masses, the hurricane. . . . To sum up: dynamism, simultaneousness, realism—direct, absolute—rhythmic structure of details and the whole: these seem to us to be the dominant characteristics of his literary form. Let us also note the love of exact documents, of authentic social observation, of the phrase or refrain snatched on the street and reproduced without comment in the manner of a historian’s notebook.¹²

Paradoxically, Serge took up serious writing at the very moment when the voices of the great Russian experimenters of the 1920s were being silenced through censorship, suicide, and arrest. If, as some have suggested, Serge had indeed turned to a writing career merely as a substitute for a political one, he could not have picked a less opportune moment.¹³ In 1928 Soviet writers were being subjected to ever increasing bureaucratic harassment and censorship since the relatively free days of the NEP, and as a result the rich flourishing of literary experimentation which had followed the Revolution was rapidly coming to an end. Royalties were astoundingly lucrative, but only for authors willing to conform. As his old friend Ilya Ionov, the director of the state publishing house, explained when Serge’s first novel, already translated into Russian and set in type, was banned, “you can produce a masterpiece every year, but as long as

12. Serge, “Boris Pilniak,” *Clarté* 36 (May 20, 1923); included in Serge, *Collected Writings*.

13. “Writing, for Serge, was something to do only when one was unable to fight actively”; Susan Weissman, *Victor Serge: The Course Is Set on Hope* (London: Verso, 2001), 110.

you are not back in the line of Party, not a line of yours will see the light.”¹⁴ Even Serge’s translations of Lenin’s *Works*, from which he derived some income, were censored, and his name was removed from the title page.¹⁵

Serge was able to survive as a writer because, although intimately involved in Russian politics and culture, he wrote in French and was published in Paris. Indeed, it was only because of his anomalous position as a Soviet citizen writing in the French language that any of his works appeared. Despite persecution, poverty, and isolation, he succeeded in sending five manuscripts off to Paris between 1929 and 1932: his history, *Year One of the Russian Revolution*; *Literature and Revolution*; and the first three novels of his witness cycle. In 1933 Serge was arrested and, having refused to confess after months of interrogation, was administratively deported to the Ural. It was his reputation as a “French” writer, exploited by loyal friends in Paris at a moment when Stalin was actively courting French public opinion, that saved him from the fate of his Russian colleagues. His case was unique. Most of his Russian colleagues, including his friend Pilniak, disappeared or died in the camps. In his 1947 pamphlet *The Tragedy of the Soviet Writers*, Serge decried the “universal cowardice” of the anti-Fascist Western writers and intellectuals, who remained silent throughout an entire decade during which their Russian colleagues—writers like Mandelstam, Pilniak, and Babel, personally known to them and translated into every language—were massacred.¹⁶

The striking fact that emerges from this rapid survey of Serge’s participation in the bright beginning, gradual corruption, and ultimate tragic massacre of the Soviet literary movement is that Serge alone, by dint of his unbending opposition and special status as a French-language Soviet writer, was able both to continue writing and to write *freely*. He spoke the truth aloud and perpetuated the

14. Serge, *Memoirs*.

15. Rièrè, *Mémoires d’un révolutionnaire*.

16. Serge, “La tragédie des écrivains soviétiques,” *Masses* (January 1947); included in *Mémoires d’un révolutionnaire*.

spiritual traditions of the Russian revolutionary intelligentsia at the very moment when the voices of his Russian colleagues were forced into silence. As one Russian scholar put it: “Although written in French, Serge’s novels are perhaps the nearest we have to what Soviet literature of the ’30s might have been. . . .”¹⁷

Serge also occupies a unique place among Western writers. With rare exceptions (John Reed, Henri Barbusse), these had remained indifferent or hostile to the Soviet Revolution during its heroic phase under Lenin and Trotsky. The great heyday of fellow-traveling “revolutionary” writers in the West was the anti-Fascist Popular Front of the 1930s. By then, Stalin had already quenched the fires of revolution in Russia under a blanket of repressive bureaucracy while relegating the workers’ movements in Europe and America to a subordinate role, supporting the interests of his regime within the capitalist democracies with which he sought alliances. As distinct from the 1920s Red decade, this “Pink decade” was a time of revolutionary writers conferences, literary pilgrimages to the “Socialist fatherland,” and access to a mass public and lucrative royalties. “The Revolution,” in the immortal words of Clara Malraux, “means seeing lots of people” (*La révolution, c’est se voir beaucoup*).

Moreover, during the 1940s, many of the writers with whom Serge is most frequently grouped—Arthur Koestler, Franz Borke-nau, Manès Sperber, and André Malraux—enlisted under the glorious banner of the anti-Communist crusade. As Peter Sedgwick pointed out years ago:

Having started earlier, Serge also lasted longer as a committed revolutionary writer. By the date of the last Moscow Trials and the Stalin-Hitler Pact, the ex-Stalinist literati had said goodbye to the revolution which they had only embraced in its most raddled flesh; Serge, who never had any illusions about Stalin and precious few about the totalitarian features

17. Neil Cornwell, *Irish Slavonic Studies* 4 (1983).

of Lenin's day, was writing for socialism until he died in late 1947. . . . He never repudiated Bolshevism as a historical imperative in Russian circumstances, and refused to join the chorus of unreason that linked the worst barbarities of Stalinism with the idea of revolution itself.¹⁸

Serge's place in world literature is thus doubly unique. "I know of no other writer with whom Serge can be very usefully compared," writes the British critic and novelist John Berger.

Serge, the unanimist, conceived of literature as "a means of expressing for people what most of them experience without the means to express, as a means of communion, as a testimony to the vast flow of life through us, whose essential aspects we must try to fix for the benefit of those who will come after us." That Serge's concept of literature has nothing to do with propaganda is evident in a striking passage in the *Memoirs*, where he explores the autonomy of the subconscious in the creative process.

Poets and novelists are not political beings because they are not essentially rational. Political intelligence, based though it is in the revolutionary's case upon a deep idealism, demands a scientific and pragmatic armour, and subordinates itself to the pursuit of strictly defined social ends. The artist, on the contrary, is always delving for his material in the subconscious, in the pre-conscious, in intuition, in a lyrical inner life which is rather hard to define; he does not know with any certainty either where he is going or what he is creating. If the novelist's characters are truly alive, they function by themselves, to a point at which they eventually take their author by surprise; and sometimes he is quite perplexed if he is called upon to classify them in terms of morality or social utility. Dostoevsky,

18. Sedgwick, "Victor Serge and Socialism," *International Socialism* 14 (Autumn 1963): 18.

Gorky, and Balzac brought to life, all lovingly, criminals whom the Political Man would shoot most unlovingly.¹⁹

Serge's Socialist politics come through in his fiction not because he writes anything remotely resembling the *roman à thèse* but because they are deeply ingrained in his experience and his vision of human beings in the world. There is no conflict of art and politics here, but rather the artistic expression of a mind enriched by a Socialist worldview. One could no more imagine a Serge without Marxism than a Dante without Catholicism. Unfortunately, the sorry example of so-called socialist realism has combined with the traditional prejudices of "art for art's sake" to reinforce a false dichotomy between art and politics in which Left political literature is ipso facto dismissed as propaganda. However, Serge's uniqueness and perhaps his greatness as a novelist was to have brought to bear his insider's experience and consciousness as a Marxist militant on one of the central themes of modern literature: the revolutionary upheaval of society. His concept was not art as propaganda, but politics as vision.

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19. Serge, *Memoirs*.