The politics of Victor Serge

Cathy Nugent reviews "The Serge-Trotsky Papers, Correspondence and other writings, between Victor Serge and Leon Trotsky". Edited and introduced by David Cotterill. Published by Pluto Press.

AT THE beginning of 1919 Victor Serge — who had been an anarchist up to then and a participant in the syndicalist-inspired Barcelona workers' uprising of 1917 — arrived in Petrograd. The first phase of the Russian workers' revolution — a struggle which was infused with workers' democracy, full of hopes of a quick victory for the workers in the West — was over. Russia was in the grip of civil war. Petrograd, centre of the revolution, was under siege by the Whites, and could fall at any time. In his *Memoirs* Serge writes of a "siege mentality" in the city's administration, and inside the Cheka (the political police) where certain individuals conducted their duties against the counter-revolution with horrifying ruthlessness. The black market, officially condemned, its traders often sentenced to death, was rife, yet it was used regularly by the government's own workers, in order to eke out a meagre existence.

Once in Petrograd, Serge became friendly with some left Mensheviks and anarchists who had given critical support to the revolution but were now disillusioned with the Bolsheviks. They were refusing to work for the defence of the regime. Serge condemned this attitude:

"I moved among intellectuals who wept for their dream of an enlightened democracy, governed by an idealistic Press (their own of course). ...face to face with the ruthlessness of history, they were wrong... if the Bolshevik insurrection had not taken power the cabal of the old generals, supported by the officers' organisations, would have certainly done so instead. Russia would have avoided the Red Terror only to endure the White, and a proletarian dictatorship only to undergo a reactionary one. In consequence, the most outraged observations of the anti-Bolshevik intellectuals only revealed to me how necessary Bolshevism was." (*Memoirs*, p74).

Despite his critical reactions to perceived institutional weaknesses of the Bolshevik-led regime (Serge believed the formation of the Cheka was "one of the gravest and most impermissible errors that the Bolshevik leaders committed in 1918") he always believed the Bolsheviks represented the workers' interests. Serge's loyalty to the revolution was given wholeheartedly. He undertook many jobs including work for the Executive of the Third International. Later he joined the

Serge and his son Vlady

Left Opposition, was expelled from the Communist Party in 1928, was arrested, released, arrested again, refused to sign a false confession and finally deported to Orenburg in Kazakhstan, Central Asia, in 1933. Serge's family and the other exiles lived under terrible conditions — none of them in that windy, poverty-stricken place had any means of earning a living. Yet they clung to their ideals and hopes for the success of the workers' revolution in the world, though they heard little news from abroad or indeed from inside the Soviet Union.

After a campaign by Serge's literary friends in France he was released. Serge settled first in Belgium and then in France.

How Serge conducted the rest of his political life, about which *The Serge-Trotsky Papers* is a partial document, contrasts to his years "inside" the Russian revolution. In short, he lost his political bearings. Serge's doubts about the "Leninist" party, and reactions to the problems of Soviet power, began to dominate his political thinking. For instance, Serge became an Executive member of the centrist Partido Obrero de Unificacion Marxista (POUM) during the Spanish civil war. The POUM tail-ended the Spanish Popular Front government, which tied the workers' organisations to bourgeois parties. As Trotsky predicted, the Stalinists, serving as lackeys for the bourgeoisie in the Front, were responsible for implementing the repression of the workers' struggle. The anarchists, the syndicalists and the POUM were crushed in 1937. The POUM, by their actions, disarmed the workers' movement and many of their members paid for it with their lives. Serge and Trotsky split on the issue. Irrevocably.

Trotsky could not understand how Serge, a historian of the Russian Revolution, could have such illusions in the Popular Front: "Everything you say about the Popular Front applies to the bloc of the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries with the [Liberal bourgeois] Kadets... as well. We, however, waged an uncompromising struggle against that bloc, and won only thanks to that." (Letter from Trotsky to Serge, July 1936, *Papers* page 89).

Serge never admitted that his views had shifted, even in the *Memoirs*, looking back over his life. There is just one small, admission, right at the end of this book: "Trotsky wrote from Norway [in 1936] that the Popular Front was leading straight to disaster, and I disagreed, wrongly, for at that juncture he saw far and true."

In Victor Serge, there is a lack of political accountability and the dominance of subjectivity in his judgements. Serge's views *changed* after he settled in the West. It seems that this was because he succumbed to the pressures of the time. This is a *centrally* important fact about Serge's political career. So the first and most important criticsm I would make about the *Papers* is there is no attempt by the editor or contributors to explain this fact.

THE COLLECTION is quite scrappy. For instance, why include Serge's writings from the 1920s about Bolshevism when this is a book about Serge's views in the 1930s? Introductions by different authors are given to each section. The opinions of these authors on "Trotskyism" vary from being reasonably balanced to uncritically accepting all of Serge's prejudices: e.g. the "shallow dogmatic and sectarian thinking [of the Trotskyist movement] was all very discouraging to Serge" (Susan Weismann). Some of their stuff reads like the thinly eked out stuff you get from ideas-starved academics, inadequately familiar with the subject on which they presume to write. Nonetheless, this is a fascinating collection, at times quite heartbreaking to read, as one gets a sense of how the Trotskyist movement was weak in numbers, and damaged by splits.

However, I would not trust the political agenda of most of the people who have translated and introduced Victor Serge's work. Peter Sedgwick was responsible for translating much of Serge's work. We should be grateful for this endeavour, of course — Serge is a writer of genius. However, Sedgwick, and others too, wanted to endorse Serge's political ideas and put him up as an alternative to Trotsky. Sedgwick was part of a "libertarian wing" of the International Socialists and remained a fellow traveller of that group right up to his death in the 1980s (i.e. after it had ditched its libertarian pretensions and degenerated into a proto-Stalinist sect). If it is unfortunate that Serge's published views are presented uncritically, it is equally unfortunate that Serge was put into circulation by people as unconscious of their own political hypocrisy as Sedgwick. Of course it is better that Serge is published than not at all, but *we must be critical.*

There are three further areas of criticism that can be raised in relation to this book.

1. Serge's views, contrary to the opinion given in the section introductions, were not derived from *objective* political assessments of reality at the time.

2. The correspondence and debate between Trotsky and Serge is in fact quite slim. The overall effect of the book is to exaggerate the importance of the debate.

3. Serge is politically wrong on virtually all of the substantive issues covered.

SERGE'S SHIFTS in opinion from 1936 were derived, in my view, from — understandably — subjective feelings about the politicians and class struggle of the time.

The state of revolutionary politics in 1936 was not good. August saw the first Moscow trial marking the beginning of the final liquidation of the Russian oppositionists. The only Trotskyist sections with any working-class base were the US, French and Belgian groups. The movement had been caught up in bitter internal disputes, not just petty squabbles, as Serge maintained, (although no doubt there were some), but arguments on matters of substance such as Trotsky's proposal, after the Communists collapsed before Hitler in 1933, that some Trotskyists should enter the mass Socialist Parties.

Over these years, many centrist groups — vacillators between revolution and reform — had been thrown up, such as the Socialist Workers' Party of Germany (SAP) and the POUM, affiliated to the International Labour Community (IAG), which was a loose grouping of parties separate from the Second or Third Internationals but 'soft' on Stalinism and opposed to the formation of the Fourth International.

For whatever reason, Serge was sucked into this bog-like political milieu. Serge obviously treasured his friendships, particularly that with Andres Nin, the leader of the POUM. Serge was capable of breaking with personal friends — he had done so after the Russian Revolution. However, then, unlike now, there was a movement locked into a struggle for power. It was imperative for revolutionaries to make a clear choice: were you with the Bolsheviks or against them? With the Trotskyists weak and divided, no such obvious choices were present. 'Friendship' loomed largest.

But the Bolshevik Party was not only a party of *action*, it was also — and fundamentally — a party of critical *thought*. Lenin's so-called dogmatism — criticised much by Serge — was in fact a resolute determination to get to grips with reality: to apply historical and political understanding to present events in order to ensure that the workers' movement could be as prepared, as organised, as it possibly could. There would have been no October Revolution without the Bolsheviks' critical thought. For this reason Lenin did not tolerate fools, charlatans and ditherers. Neither did Trotsky. Serge could not understand this. He could not understand why Trotsky broke with Andres Nin for instance. Serge did not learn the most important lessons of the Russian Revolution.

THE DEBATE Serge had with Trotsky is very slim. Trotsky's main concern on Serge's arrival in Belgium is to hear news of the Russian opposition, not to win Serge to "Trotskyism". In fact Trotsky assumes Serge will naturally fall in with the Belgian comrades. Further, he wants Serge to make up his own mind — what a libertarian!

The importance of Serge's relationship with Trotsky is exaggerated. The authors want, I think, to say "These two great men could have been better friends in different circumstances".

This is further implied by the importance attached to how agent provocateurs helped to sour relations. Undoubtedly this was a factor — the case is well made in the book. But still, the emphasis is wrong.

SERGE IS wrong on four substantial subjects covered by this book: I have already dealt with the first: the role of Popular Fronts. Other issues are: the Spanish Revolution, Serge's reassessment of the Russian Revolution and the Bolshevik suppression of the 1921 rebellion at Kronstadt and the question of building a new, Fourth International and the revolutionary party.

On the Spanish Revolution, Serge justified the POUM's participation in the Catalan provisional (Popular Front) government on

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the grounds of the need to influence the government from within, thus facilitating the arming of the masses. This was wishful thinking. The main partners in the government were the enemies of the workers: bourgeois parties and Stalinists.

In the debate on Kronstadt, Serge seems very vexed and bruised by Trotsky's harsh criticisms — this was at the height of the debates over the Spanish Revolution and the Moscow Trials. Those hostile to Trotsky equated what Stalin was then doing with Leninism and Trotsky's conduct during the civil war. Serge argued that not enough was done to win over the Kronstadt rebels and avert the tragedy and they were too high-handedly dealt with. He admits, however, that the choice in the end was whether or not a renewed civil war could be nipped in the bud. Trotsky replied dismissively: "Advice like this is very easy to give after the event". Trotsky was irritated at having to have this debate, at a time when "Trotskyism" and Leninism were under attack. Although Serge was right to defend the principle of honest debate, hindsight was just not available to the Soviet government and the Petrograd soviet as it fought to stave off civil war. Second guessing the Bolsheviks in 1937, and in the company Serge was keeping on these questions, must have seemed to Trotsky to be shameful and reprehensible work.

In the end Serge thought that it was a mistake to set up the kind of Fourth International Trotsky wanted in 1937 (different to his 1933 proposal for a broad International, with the Trotskyists as only one current within it), as its sections were too weak and moreover thoroughly sectarian, and ultimately dependent on the personal intervention of "the Old Man". The solution he said, "lies in an alliance with all the left wing currents of the workers' movement". In other words Serge wanted a rag-bag international like the IAG, full of all kinds of sceptics and semi-Stalinists. But the workers' movement needed then a clear set of ideas to fight the Popular Front and exploit revolutionary situations. Serge's was not, and is not even with hindsight, a creditable position.

Serge fails to reply to many of Trotsky's criticisms. Over the last episode of dispute, Serge writes one reply, then does not publish it; inexplicably he gives up the fight, although it was a matter of his own integrity and, it seems, he was clearly in the right.

Serge did not, despite all the claims made about his concern for the freedom to criticise etc., know the true value of debate in the revolutionary party. Some subjects are so important, that clarity being vitally important, it is necessary to pursue the logic of the dispute down to the smallest detail and to put all personal considerations ruthlessly aside. This is what Trotsky did. Serge felt everything would somehow come right in the class struggle, all differences would melt away: "You must count on [forging] in the crucible a true party of revolution destined to assume all its responsibilities," he wrote to Nin in August 1936 *(Papers,* page 125). There is sometimes truth in this approach; after all Serge's differences were put to one side in the struggle of the Russian Revolution. But the Russian Revolution only succeeded because of the sharp debates in and around the Bolsheviks in the years prior to 1917.

SERGE WAS a centrist. He was always closer to revolution than reform only because there was not a careerist bone in his body: his politics were shaped by good-hearted naivety, not self-interest. But as Trotsky said "the revolution abhors centrism" and in these the success or defeat of a workers' revolution in Europe was at stake.

In the end, Serge's historical writing and novels will endure despite his political failings. They will endure precisely because of the wonderful *emotional* quality of his work. Serge is an attractive character and it is painful to be critical of him; nonetheless these documents do inspire criticism.

Serge was a true, good willed, but unhelpful friend to Trotsky. The death of all the old Bolsheviks was, for Serge, a crushing defeat. For him, no one except the Old Man could match the Bosheviks in ability. After Trotsky's death Serge wrote "There is nobody any more who knows what the Russian Revolution really was, and what the Bolsheviks were — and men judge without knowing, in elemental rancour and rigidity." But Serge knew what the Bolsheviks were and was able to communicate it. This is how we should remember Victor Serge. WL