

Unforgiving Years

by Victor Serge (Translated from the French and with an introduction by Richard Greeman), NYRB Classics, 2008, 368 pp.

Michael Weiss

In the course of reviewing the memoirs of N.N. Sukhanov – the man who famously called Stalin a ‘gray blur’ – Dwight Macdonald gave a serviceable description of the two types of radical witnesses to the Russian Revolution: ‘Trotsky’s is a bird’s-eye view – a revolutionary eagle soaring on the wings of Marx and History – but Sukhanov gives us a series of close-ups, hopping about St. Petersburg like an earth-bound sparrow – curious, intimate, sharp-eyed.’ If one were to genetically fuse these two avian observers into one that took flight slightly after the Bolshevik seizure of power, the result would be Victor Serge.

Macdonald knew quite well who Serge was; the New York Trotskyist and scabrous polemicist of *Partisan Review* was responsible, along with the surviving members of the anarchist POUM faction of the Spanish Civil War, for getting him out of Marseille in 1939, just as the Nazis were closing in and anti-Stalinist dissidents were escaping the charnel houses of Eurasia – or not escaping them, as was more often the case. Macdonald, much to his later chagrin, titled his own reflections on his youthful agitations and indiscretions *Memoirs of a Revolutionist*, an honourable if slightly wince-making tribute to Serge, who earned every syllable in his title, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*. And after the dropping of both atomic bombs on Japan, it was Macdonald’s faith in socialism that began to flag, while his hounded political and moral mentor took refuge in the ‘pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will.’ Or, as Serge famously described his outlook in ‘Constellation of Dead Brothers,’ one of the many poems he composed in semi-captivity in Kazakhstan, ‘The ardent voyage continues, / the course is set on hope.’ (The second half of this couplet provided the title for Susan Weissman’s 2001 biography of Serge.)

Life of a Revolutionist

The man born Victor Kibalchich in Belgium in 1890 to a family made up of banished Russian intelligentsia first employed his nom de plume in Barcelona, in an article defending Friedrich Adler, who had been condemned to death for assassinating the Count Sturgkh in Vienna. Sturgkh was one of the Hapsburgs responsible for starting the First World War, and thus the shockwave that led to

WEISS | On Victor Serge's Unforgiving Years

the fall of the Romanovs – the subject, incidentally, of Serge's next article under that byline. He called his birth a matter of sheer 'chance,' given the torments and uncertainties to which his line was subjected. Indeed, Serge would become one of those wraiths of ideology that tend to get swept away in the clean-up operations of history. If he avoided the infamous 'dustbin' entirely, it was due to his stoicism and cosmopolitanism – he simply knew too many people in countries other than his own to be got rid of quietly. Though he died in penury in Mexico, Serge's legacy was posthumously maintained and burnished by a small but vocal group of near-obsessive admirers, namely Peter Sedgwick, who died in 1983, and Richard Greeman, the translator of this superb and mercifully rediscovered novel. The two scholars have Englished the bulk of Serge's work, originally written in French, and they seem to know everybody who has ever held an opinion on him, anywhere. Their admiration would be wholly warranted if only because their subject shared three fundamental traits with another great radical, man of action and marginalised prophet, Thomas Paine: Serge went wherever barricades were being erected; he was imprisoned on false charges yet used his time in captivity to better hone his heretical and independent mind; and he categorically opposed the death penalty.

After joining the Belgian Social Young Guard at the age of fourteen and toiling for its anarchist pamphlet *The Rebel*, Serge migrated to Paris where he became the editor of the radical sheet *L'anarchie*. He proofread and translated Russian novels to earn a living while pursuing his real passion: rallying the Parisian demimonde. There were two formative episodes in pre-war France. The first was the capital murder of a twenty-year-old French worker called Liabeuf – an event that united the militant ranks of all tendencies in a chorus of outrage. The boy had been arrested for trying to help a prostitute with whom he had fallen in love. After being railroaded through a corrupt court system and having his name blackened by a venal constabulary, he sought vengeance and ended up wounding a few police officers. Liabeuf was guillotined after a night of frantic protests led by Jean Jaurès and the charismatic Catalan Miguel Almeréyda on the Boulevard Arago. For Serge, the episode solidified his revulsion against mob justice and the tumbrel, 'which replies to the crime of the primitive, the retarded, the deprived, the half-mad or the hopeless,' he wrote, 'by nothing short of a collective crime, carried out coldly by men invested with authority, who believe that they are on that account innocent of the pitiful blood they shed.' It was a judgment that would return with its own special vengeance and irony in subsequent decades, as would the one he formed at the end of the second Gallic affair in which he was more personally involved. This was the arrest of the so-called 'Bonnot gang' of anarchists, mainly fellow imports from

Brussels, who held up banks using automobiles at a time when the constabulary still travelled on bicycles. Though the 21-year-old Serge was only tangentially affiliated with these outlaws – he knew a few from back home – he was nevertheless arrested as a conspirator and confined to a small cell in La Santé Prison. He was interrogated but refused to rat on his comrades, which fact infuriated one of the magistrates in the subsequent trial: ‘A revolutionary at twenty! Yes – and you will be a plutocrat at forty!’ ‘I do not think so,’ came the terse reply. Serge received five years solitary confinement for his trouble, no doubt satisfied with the saving grace of having got the editor of *L’anarchie* acquitted by his brilliant dynamiting of the prosecution’s case. His forensic skill, even when judges, juries and executioners were stacked solidly against him, would come to his rescue again later in life.

Serge was never fully a Bolshevik. ‘I was with them, albeit independently, without renouncing thought or critical sense.’ This might have owed in part to his late arrival to the city then known as Petrograd, later Leningrad, in 1919. (Serge was held captive by the French authorities due to his insurrectionary activity in Barcelona. They exchanged him along with a handful of Russians for French nationals being held by Moscow as prisoners of World War I.) Almost concurrent with his touching down on native soil – it was also alien soil since he had never before been to his parents’ homeland – Serge felt the knout of dashed expectation:

In Petrograd we expected to breathe the air of a liberty that would doubtless be harsh and even cruel to its enemies, but was still generous and bracing. And in this paper we found a colourless article, signed ‘G. Zinoviev,’ on ‘The Monopoly of Power.’ ‘Our Party rules alone... it will not allow anyone... The false democratic liberties demanded by the counter-revolution.’ I am quoting from memory, but such was certainly the sense of the piece. We tried to justify it by the state of the siege and the moral perils; however, such considerations could justify particular acts, acts of violence towards men and ideas, but not a theory based on the extinction of all freedom.

A sign of things to come. Still, he was in good with the Leninists, who made him the custodian of the Okhrana archives and therefore the secret and murderous history of the czars. This no doubt furthered Serge’s commitment to October, as well as catalysed some of his less impressive apologetics for ensuing atrocities, such as the suppression of the Kronstadt rebellion in 1923. But it also made him understand how the past had a nasty habit of intruding upon the present. To his credit, Serge tried to represent the Kronstadt episode, ever the Damascene moment

WEISS | On Victor Serge's Unforgiving Years

for many erstwhile Reds, as it actually occurred, not as the Kremlin propagandised it in its partisan press, which, as he pungently stated it, was 'positively berserk with lies.' Serge thought that his status as a fellow-travelling functionary could mitigate the government's excesses of violence, paranoia and hysterical incrimination. 'The telephone became my personal enemy,' he recorded in his Memoirs. 'At every hour it brought me voices of panic-stricken women who spoke of arrests, imminent executions, and injustice, and begged me to intervene at once, for the love of God!'

Serge participated in a kind of home front during the Russian Civil War, when the White Army drove right up to Polkovo Heights in Petrograd, only to be beaten back by brave partisan street fighters. He searched homes looking for arms and ran across rooftops trailing enemy agents, all the while vowing that after the period of *la patrie en danger* was at an end he would return to his more instinctive role as an outspoken opponent of all forms of state repression.

At his worst, Serge was too dismissive during the Civil War of the misfit intellectuals who 'wept for their dream of an enlightened democracy, governed by a sagacious Parliament and inspired by an idealistic Press (their own, of course),' but even in this he had a well-grounded fear of what might happen if the current regime fell. 'Russia would have avoided the Red Terror only to endure the White, and a proletarian dictatorship only to undergo a reactionary one.' No revisionist is entitled to underestimate or diminish the cruelty and anti-Semitism of the czarist irredentists. Yet the very dialectical keenness that made him wary of these what-ifs also outfitted Serge with an arsenal for use against his own side. He understood that the founding of the Cheka was 'one of the gravest and most impermissible errors' the Bolsheviks committed in 1918, when fear of losing power made them forfeit any moral claims on keeping it, because what was the new secret police but a recrudescence of the old? His preferred term for describing the pathology that gripped the Politburo and the rank-and-file henchmen was 'psychosis.' On the very same day that the Party newspapers were heralding the end of the death penalty (it was later reinstated), the Cheka succumbed to 'occupational psychosis' and murdered some 200 or 300 of its prisoners. Also loathsome to him was the Kremlin's treatment of its former facilitators, the many 'Black' anarchists who helped secure the Crimea during the Civil War. At Pyotr Kropotkin's funeral, Serge was the only Party member allowed to circulate among the surviving left ultras, all awaiting their inevitable fates in the nightmarish opposite of a stateless utopia for which they now felt partly responsible for bringing into being.

Unsurprisingly, then, for a man who lived solely by his wits and his pen, the harassment and censorship of writers and poets anguished Serge like nothing else – and here he did chart a course different from most oppositionists in that he was highly attuned to the putrescence of Russian culture. He belonged to the Free Philosophic Society, or *Volfila*, ‘the last surviving free-thought society’ in Russia, where he mingled with many of the true artists and poets that flourished during the New Economic Period (NEP), or that brief liberal interregnum (1921-1928) between the Civil War and ‘Thermidor.’ He was on intimate terms with Andrei Bely, Alexander Blok, and Vladimir Mayakovsky, and brought their emerging talents to the attention of the French via Henri Barbusse’s journal *Clarté*. Then, once the Soviet Writers Union, of which Serge was a member, became little more than a second on the state dictatorship, his friend, and in many ways his American counterpart, Max Eastman, decried the literary dogmatism of socialist realism; the land of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky had now become, as Eastman phrased it, a parade-ground for ‘writers in uniform.’

Serge’s pen-portraits of the various revolutionary and cultural luminaries he came to know betray a Balzacian eye for the evocative detail – what was assailed in his day as a dangerous ‘individualist’ tendency in writing. Bely, embarrassed by his glabrous pate, wore a ‘skull-cap beneath which his great seer’s eyes, of a stony greenish-blue, gave out a continual gaze.’ Trotsky was ‘all tension and energy... whose metallic voice projected a great distance, ejaculating its short sentences that were often sardonic and always infused with a truly spontaneous passion.’ Lenin had the vocabulary of a ‘newspaper-article... here was a man of a basic simplicity, talking to you honestly with the sole purpose of convincing you, appealing exclusively to your judgment, to facts and sheer necessity.’ Gramsci in Vienna was ‘an industrious and Bohemian exile, late to bed and late to rise.’ The barbarous Bela Kun of Hungary was ‘the incarnation of intellectual inadequacy, uncertainty of will, and authoritarian corruption.’ And Barbusse was ‘concerned above all not to be involved, not to see anything that could involve him against his will, concerned above all to disguise opinions he could no longer express openly, sliding past any direct questioning, scurrying off along all conceivable tangents, his eyes vague, his slender hands circumscribing curves in the air around obscure words like ‘immensity,’ ‘profundities,’ ‘exaltation’ – and all with the real aim of making himself the accomplice of the winning side!’

Still, Serge could move easily from the pointillistic to the world-historic. He served as an agent of the Communist International in Berlin, where he glimpsed not only Russia’s arcane and half-baked program for exporting revolution to Europe, but

WEISS | On Victor Serge's Unforgiving Years

also future troubles brewing in the Weimar Republic. 'Everything was for sale, the daughters of the bourgeoisie in the bars, the daughters of the people in the streets, officials, import and export licenses, State papers, businesses in whose prospects nobody believed.' Was it any wonder that the German workers' uprising of 1922, confined to Hamburg and consisting of a mere 300 disorganised militants failed in complete farce? It was around this time that Serge also caught wind of another disturbing phenomenon in Europe: Fascism. The following belongs in some vertebrae-rattling volume of quotations by the Cassandras of the vanquished left:

The march on Rome and the rise of Mussolini were understood by no one in the International except a few isolated militants... The opinion of the leadership was that this was a piece of reactionary buffoonery which would soon die away and open the path to revolution. I opposed this view, saying that this new variety of counter-revolution had taken the Russian Revolution as its schoolmaster in matters of repression and mass-manipulation through propaganda; further, it had succeeded in recruiting a host of disillusioned, power-hungry, ex-revolutionaries; consequently, its rule would last for years.

Upon returning to Russia and joining the Left Opposition, of the Trotsky-Zinoviev-Kamenev 'bloc,' Serge told Andres Nin, the future leader of the POUM in Spain, 'If a madman were to shoot some satrap or other, there is a grave risk that we would all be shot before the week was out' – a throwaway remark that not only furnished an immediate example, the murder of Sergei Kirov in 1934, which was the dam-break of the Great Terror, but also gave Serge the subject of his masterpiece, *The Case of Comrade Tulayev* (1948). That book, re-released in 2004 by NYRB Classics, is seen as the high-water mark in the vast roman-fleuve of Serge's collected fiction, as well as the best historical novel ever published about the Stalinist Terror.

I'm not the first to suggest that the esteem for Serge's literary gifts has overshadowed the recognition of his skills as a real-time political diagnostician. Apart from claiming to have first invented the word 'totalitarian' to describe the Soviet state – he did so in a letter to Maurice and Magdeleine Paz and others in 1932, reaffirming the need to defend 'man,' 'truth' and 'thought' from the forces of reactions that were innate in socialism – Serge later predicted three ways that the U.S.S.R could develop following the Second World War. If it didn't yield to external or internal pressures, it would be consumed by war, probably nuclear and therefore apocalyptic. If it downplayed its brinkmanship due to external pressure but refused to reform within, the chance of war was diminished but not erased completely. Finally, '[i]f

under combined pressure of masses at home and of the international conflicts which will arise in various ways, the regime may try and evolve towards a democratisation. Upon the slightest relaxation of terrorist totalitarianism, immense possibilities are opened out, which may cause the emergence in Russia of a Socialist-inclined or Socialist democracy, and permit a peaceful collaboration with the world outside. The nightmare of war is then removed.' The two other thinkers to anticipate this third and actual course were George Orwell and Robert Conquest.

A self-satisfied hindsight may deride as naïve Serge's abiding faith that socialism could be rescued from bureaucratic degeneration and that Stalinism could be defeated from within. Even at the sorriest hour of the Left Opposition, he kept an affirming flame:

It is often said that 'the germ of all Stalinism was in Bolshevism at its beginning.' Well, I have no objection. Only, Bolshevism also contained many other germs – a mass of other germs – and those who lived through the enthusiasm of the first years of the first victorious revolution ought not to forget it. To judge the living man by the death germs which the autopsy reveals in a corpse – and which he may have carried in him since birth – is this very sensible?

This is not the conventional wisdom today, when almost all historians of 1917 – with the notable exception of Roy Medvedev – believe the whole 'experiment' went wrong at the start. What price counterfactual history in the face of so many atrocities? It is not easy to take the measure of internal critics of Bolshevism, who were right in their analyses and denunciations of Stalinism but had little or not enough to say about the graver injustices being committed simultaneously against the Russian people (the term for this sort of moral double bookkeeping is *Dvoeverye*.) Many hung on hoping to change the system perhaps longer than they should have done. But as against a wholesale indictment of those whose dissidence may have come too late or been too narrow in scope, Conquest has sanely argued that

courage and clear-headedness are admirable in themselves. And if they do not rank high among the moral virtues, we can see in some of the Soviet oppositionists something rather better. It is true that those who did not confess, and were shot secretly, demonstrated not merely a higher courage, but a better sense of values. In them, however touched by the demands of

WEISS | On Victor Serge's Unforgiving Years

Party and revolutionary loyalty, loyalty to the truth and the idea of a more humane regime prevailed.

Serge was never shot secretly, but he embodied every other cited characteristic. I would add that his unsurpassed contribution to the cause of independent socialism was made more remarkable still given his willingness to feud openly with his fellow oppositionists on matters of principle and therefore risk censure and obloquy from all quarters. He faulted Trotsky's disdain for what the latter called a 'military mutiny within a Socialist regime;' the founder of the Red Army was popular enough with the soldiery and workers that he might have, with greater cunning, staved off the monstrous triangulator of the Politburo. 'Sometimes you finish like Liebknecht,' he remarked to Serge, embracing a damned fate, 'and sometimes like Lenin.' But haplessness is not a moral failure either, and of the three main issues at stake in the battle of ideas – the agricultural policy, intra-Party democracy, and the bungled Chinese Revolution – the Left Opposition would prove prescient and correct.

Serge remained at liberty far longer than he expected, almost certainly owing to his international reputation. Had he only been a Russian militant, he remarked, and not a French author, he'd have surely been ensnared in the nation-wide dragnet for 'counterrevolutionaries' much earlier. When the inevitable arrest did come in March 1928, following his expulsion from the Party, Serge seemed almost relieved. His sister-in-law had implicated him in a 'Trotskyist' conspiracy, but drawing from his experiences in La Sante, he knew to refuse the one thing his interrogators needed most for an open-and-shut sham case: a confession. He was held for two months without charges. Upon his release, he moved to Paris and wrote three novels – *Men in Prison* (1930), *Birth of Our Power* (1931), and *Conquered City* (1932) – plus a respected history, *Year One of the Russian Revolution* (1930). After returning to Leningrad, which seemed a suicidal decision, and associating with the ever-dwindling number of oppositionists there, Serge was rearrested in 1933. This time he was deported to Orenburg, an exile camp in the heart of the Ural Mountains, where he and his son lived in poverty and on the brink of starvation, and he nearly died of an anthrax tumour (he worried about being murdered by the G.P.U. in the local hospital that treated him). For all the good his continental fame did him, Serge was still able to note bitterly that during the June 1935 International Congress of Writers for the Defense of Culture, the entire guest list of Soviet writers claimed no knowledge of him or his legal status except to say that he had somehow been involved in the Kirov assassination, the all-purpose charge when none other could be readily concocted. Serge is cutting in his recollection of such cowardice: 'Kirshon did not

suspect that two years later, he himself would disappear, in complete obscurity, into the G.P.U. prisons... Ehrenburg forgot his flight from Russia, his banned novels, his accusation against Bolshevism of “crucifying Russia.”

Serge was only saved from execution by the intervention of the French left: Romain Rolland (with whom he had previously quarrelled), André Gide, André Malraux, Boris Souvarine and various trade unionists raised enough of a fuss about his persecution that Stalin himself, when confronted by Rolland, signed off on Serge’s safe conduct out of the Soviet Union. Tellingly, Serge was one of the few oppositionists not implicated publicly at any point during the Moscow Trials – yet another odd bit of good fortune that allowed Stalin to manumit him without losing too much face.

Once back in Belgium, he had a few educational encounters with apparatchiks and spies that clearly licensed material for his forthcoming fiction. He had planned to meet the notorious agent Ignace Reiss, rumoured to have crossed over to the opposition after the Zinoviev Trial. However, shortly before their scheduled rendezvous, Reiss was murdered with poisoned chocolates. In another instance, Serge and Trotsky’s son Leon Sedov spoke with Walter Krivitsky who would years later wind up with a bullet in his head in a Washington, D.C., hotel room. Krivitsky was responsible for the Reiss murder, but he, too, was said to be wavering in his loyalty to Moscow Central by the time Serge agreed to meet him on a darkened boulevard in Paris, near La Sante prison, by now something of an ominous lodestone to which the stateless and hounded revolutionary kept returning. Whenever Krivitsky reached in his pocket for a cigarette, Serge reflexively aped the gesture.

Unforgiving Years

So ends the real drama of the *Memoirs*. *Unforgiving Years* picks up pretty much from this noir moment of clandestine continental intrigue. Serge’s final novel, here translated into English for the first time, which he had written for the ‘desk drawer,’ drops us without prelude into the middle of a perspiring secret agent’s departure from the ‘Organization.’ Completed in 1946, at the threshold of the atomic age and the Cold War, the book has a frenzied, cosmic urgency to it. It’s written as a kind of World War II epic in miniature, with poetry masquerading as prose, and the apocalypse as an omnipresent theme. Serge described his own book as ‘terrifying’ and said its composition had caused him actual headaches for its exploration of limits of human consciousness in an age where the state controlled people’s

WEISS | On Victor Serge's Unforgiving Years

thoughts and war machines meted out 'pan-destruction.' *Unforgiving Years* is not just a spy thriller; it's a forerunner of the existentialist novel.

Don DeLillo somewhere refers to the 'world-hum' that postmodern fiction aims to capture; Serge might be considered an early metronome for it. Indeed, the book is divided, as Richard Greeman puts it, into four 'symphonic movements,' each with its own 'tone and atmosphere.' Our protagonists are a quartet of Comintern agents bound less by their mutual acquaintance with one another than by their shared doubts as to the legitimacy of their shadow-bathed enterprise and the direction history is headed. Serge makes brilliant use of his internationalism, giving us evocative illustrations of pre-war Paris, Leningrad and Berlin under siege, and post-war Mexico.

The first chapter, 'The Secret Agent,' which was published separately in *Le Monde* in 1971, involves 'D,' who is introduced as having already broken with the 'Organization' and plotted his escape from a life of double and triple identities. That he has two other aliases, 'Sacha' and 'Bruno Battisti,' is apt in light of the fact that he is clearly based on three real-life counterparts: Reiss, Krivitsky and Alexander Barmine, the former Russian brigadier-general who defected to the United States during the purges and went to work for the U.S. Army, and then the Office of Strategic Services, which later became the C.I.A. Not that D, who has 'travelled in the past with a cyanide capsule glued to his scalp' contemplates any similar career jump; his resignation will be final, if not terminal. 'He believed the Organization to be infallible,' Serge writes, 'by virtue of its stability, its ramifications, its resources, its power, its single-minded commitment – even by the complicity of its opponents, who feed it, sometimes involuntarily, sometimes as a deliberate ploy. But from the day he had begun to pull away from the Organization, he felt himself rejected by it; and its power behind him, within him, became stifling.' Should he join with the oppositionists? He would only be formally associating with men he's been spying on for years, and confronting the agents provocateurs whom he helped infiltrate those schismatic sects. Power is all that D has left to believe in, and he has already swapped his ideologue's certitude for a prematurely fashionable relativism: 'Truth, stripped of its metaphysical poetry, exists only in the brain. Destroy a few brains, quickly done! Then, goodbye truth. Power is against them, against me, there's nothing we can do about it. The torrent is washing us away.'

'Hearts once full of enthusiasm,' intoned Blok, 'have nothing left but fatal nothingness.' But D isn't quite the nihilist such tumults of hopelessness indicate.

He's still got enough of a survival instinct to obsess over making two of the same mistakes Reiss did: he mails his letter of resignation before leaving the Organization, and he informs a zealous young protégé, the French painter Alain, of his intention. Serge sets no definitive date for the 'The Secret Agent,' but it is clear that the liquidation of Lenin's general staff has commenced in earnest because the constant parade of so many unlikely traitors to the revolution is cited as a major cause of D's heresy.

One reason Stalin couldn't stomach the advent of ex-Bolsheviks was that he knew their defection would trigger latent or suppressed instincts for doubt and self-scrutiny in the younger cadres, of which Alain serves as the novel's main example. Alain, too, will be tortured into truth by war, for now only the seeds of his future disavowal are being planted. D's confesses to him in the Paris Metro:

He was conducting an experiment on the boy, while operating alive on himself. Putting friendship to the test by a display of futile bravado. D became aware – odd, for such sentiments ought to have died out in him – of a wish to be understood. After all, he had shaped this youth's very soul; Alain couldn't fail to see that if he, D, was bailing out, if D himself couldn't go along any longer, if even D was giving it up, then serious things must be happening which finally should be condemned. A man's conscience is secondary in the battle for such a great cause – but now it's essential.

A wish to be understood by his interrogator is what confounds Rubashov in the early pages of *Darkness at Noon*; how to profess his innocence when an auto-da-fé is the greatest final act he can perform for the Party? Koestler's tragic hero, who, like D, predates the revolution, must re-learn the so-called 'grammatical fiction' of individual conscience that had been snuffed from the hive brain of ideology. There is no scene of inquisition in *Unforgiving Years*, but Serge puts D through same motions of epistemic revolution: 'Our unpardonable error was to believe what they call soul – I prefer to call it conscience – was no more than a projection of the old superseded egoism,' he remarks at one point. 'If I'm still alive, it's because I realized that we misrepresented the grandeur of conscience.'

One notes a slightly ethereal aspect to D's conversion. Serge's poetry was rife with religious iconography – in one eyebrow-raising example he refers to himself as the 'Son of man.' Though it wasn't the teleological similarities between Marxism and Christianity that impressed him so much as the martyrological ones; was there not

WEISS | On Victor Serge's Unforgiving Years

a biblical patina to the suffering and submission of so many friends and comrades in so short a period? Consciousness is Serge's profane replacement for 'soul.' His son Vlady, who died in 2005 after having established himself as one of Mexico's foremost painters and muralists, once wittily termed his father's underlying philosophy 'materialist spirituality.'

Not that the spirituality ever fully eclipsed the materialism. Some of Serge's satiric vignettes of a glutted but narcoleptic Paris of the thirties are minor classics of the *épater* genre. A rootless cosmopolitan, he never nonetheless seems to have retained a kind of citizenship of French impressionism. Serge's finest minor character is Monsieur Gobfin, the manager of a hotel in the rue de Rochechouart, where D and Nadine hole up after leaving their previous and now compromised residence. When he suspects that one of his guests, a nattily dressed black man, is a wanted murderer, he confides his suspicion in D, who mistakes the allusions to cloak-and-dagger criminality as code for having been detected himself. The glitter and doom of the interwar period fuse with *la comédie humaine* in Gobfin:

Guided by intuition alone, one night when business was slow and half the rooms were free, Monsieur Gobfin put on his most ingratiating voice to lament, to the giggly young lady in the expensive straw hat and her small-boned gentleman friend with hair dyed the colour of flax, that there was nothing available, and sent them to the competition: 'You'll find it very comfortable there, Madame, Monsieur. They're even a bit more modern than we are!' (Two days later he learned in *Le Petit Parisien* of the sudden and suspicious demise of this industrialist from the Rhone, whose mistress was being sought by the prosecutor's office... It was one of the supreme satisfactions of his life.) He likewise saw off the obese individual bursting with commercial probity – a respected notary solicitor, company director? – who turned up with a transvestite playing the part of the young mistress to perfection; the competition found itself the scene of an uproarious farce, kept quiet by a hefty sum of hush money. Monsieur Gobfin was only half gratified by this outcome; he took pride in his perspicacity, but missing out on a hefty sum because of it is galling, you have to admit.

The demimonde acts as a microcosm of 'well-fed Europe, smugly wallowing in its pleasures,' as D later snarls, to somewhat diminished effect, and we know, even if Monsieur Gobfin does not, that the burlesque of the purblind cannot last very much longer. It is later than you think. But if D has any bulwark in this

deteriorating landscape, it is not Nadine, or 'Noémi,' his naïve and timorous 'wife' in the underground; it is Daria, another conflicted Comintern agent, but one he feels he can trust because he met her back when she was a fearless factory committee secretary, and he a supplier of materials to manufacturers. In a flashback to 1919, during the period of war communism, D remembers how Daria put herself at his mercy by admitting freely that she was stealing from the state:

'I burn moldy floorboards from the disused workshops. That's illegal, I don't have the permit from the Nationalized Companies Conservation Commission. I sell one-fifth of the output to the peasants, plus defective items, which means I can provide potatoes for the workforce. That's illegal, too, Comrade. I pay for sixty percent of my raw-materials allowance in kind – illegal. I provide a weekly ration of red or white wine to pregnant women, convalescents, over forty-fives, and anyone who's clocked in ten days running, to everyone really. That's probably illegal... And I send cases of cognac to the president to the Special Repression Commission, to keep myself out of jail.'

Daria is an inversion of the gritty woman comrade of socialist realist propaganda – her fortitude and industriousness are put to counterrevolutionary use. She is also the most convincing female character dreamt up by an author not known for his deft handling of the opposite sex (this was Susan Sontag's sole criticism of *The Case of Comrade Tulayev*). Even after her commitment to the Party calcifies and she is recruited for intelligence work abroad, Daria is never conceivable as an automaton or mere functionary. She is that original archetype of the anti-Stalinist novel, a noble political fraud, who slowly, painfully, comes to terms with her own fraudulence. She suffers a nervous breakdown in a cinema at the Champs-Élysées after learning of the execution of twenty-seven Old Bolsheviks back in Russia and yet it is less fealty to the Kremlin than fatalism about the world that causes her to refuse to join D and Nadine in their escape. She returns to the Motherland, first to a remote, sand-swept outpost in Kazakhstan, then to the snow-capped hell of embattled Leningrad, to do her part in the war against Fascism. Might it be going too far to suggest that she reflects something of Serge's own ambivalent 'commitment?' 'The end justifies the means, what a swindle,' Daria tells D. 'No end can be achieved by anything but appropriate means. If we trample on the man of today, will we do anything worthwhile for the man of tomorrow?' (Serge was audience to Panaït Istrati's animadversion on the 'omelets and eggs' excuse for the mounting pile of corpses in the Soviet Union. 'All right,' Istrati said, 'I can see the broken eggs. Where's this omelet of yours?')

WEISS | On Victor Serge's Unforgiving Years

Daria's chapter is titled 'The Flame Beneath the Snow,' which has dual precedence in Serge's oeuvre – it's the name of a prose-poem he wrote about Petrograd in 1921, whose themes are echoed in a similar threnody, 'City': 'City, city, vast city, / vast, immobile city, / I know full well there are flames / devouring you beneath the snow.' Daria channels Serge's literary conscience: she keeps a self-censored journal 'whose carefully chosen words sketched out only the outer shapes of people, events, and ideas: a poem constructed of gaps cut from the lived material, because – since it could be seized – it could not contain a single name, a single recognizable face, a single unmistakable strand of the past, a single allusion to assignments accomplished (about which it is forbidden to write without prior permission).' Thus *Unforgiving Years*, which was finished two years before Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* saw daylight, features a 'book within a book,' or rather a series of them. When the nosy Major Ipatov inspects them, he can only bring himself to praise Daria's lyric talent. She burns all the journals 'without a twinge of regret,' starting first with her book of bereavements. It's a rite performed not just to evade the censor, it seems, but to grow inured to death itself, which has become a pervasive industry in wartime Leningrad, with its 'gray flakes' and 'formless shadows.' The penultimate stanza of 'City' runs: 'You are not a cemetery, / you are an immense vessel – / the first one bound / for the dawn or for death.' And more unnerving than the frozen corpses lying motionless on the ground are the ones that move toward you:

Each corpse was firmly tied to a sled pulled on a string by its next of kin; a new breed of resourceful specialists earned their food by sewing discarded sheets or squares of sackcloth around the remains: There, look, isn't that nice, almost as snug as a coffin! Daria passed several such mummies on the street, rigid pods floating just above the trodden snow. A living man or woman to pull the string and sometimes a child behind, steering the mummy so as to spare it too many knocks and jolts – a somewhat superfluous solicitude...

Children formulate a waste calculus for their dying parents and relatives: how much food they require, how many months they have left, what their survival costs the family. Even a night of fumbled intimacy with the well-meaning Klim, who agrees to share his half-standing tenement apartment with Daria, can't distract from the morbidity. But we're also meant to understand that some forms of scarcity are not temporary and will outlast the blockade: 'There were ways and ways of dying slowly while remaining partly alive, getting dressed, walking down the street, doing the day's work, eating tasteless food, submitting to the ceaseless assaults of the belly and its deliriums during sleep.' Is this an elegy on war or peace in the Soviet Union?

From such squalor and desolation, how can Russia be poised for a comeback? Through formulaic art, for one, the literature of 'hypnosis' that fortifies the resolve to win. In an officers' club, Daria thumbs through some Soviet literary magazine, at first seeing only a shabby infantry of commissioned writers exhibiting 'as much variation as you'd discover within a regiment on the march.' But then she discerns an irrepressible humanity breaking through thick crust of lies, as if to defy the possibility of a mechanised prose. Man is the 'atom of military power,' and it takes more than edicts from the Politburo to solidify the molecular bonds of nationality. Serge puts a more optimistic gloss on the dire prognosis made by Max Eastman about the interleaving of politics and literature in the 20's: 'So let the imagination of poets and novelists put on a uniform and obey orders – but let each retain his gnarled or stony visage, as each wages war in his own way.' Is there no use for a phalanx of writers, after all? Can crude propaganda have any redemptive value so long as individual authors are responsible for it?

Another way Russians will beat Prussians is through bovine resistance. Captain Potapov, Daria's superior, sounds like a *muzhik* philosopher out of Chekhov explaining the mass psychology and the dialectically arrived-at virtues of his countrymen. Stalin was no fool, in his 'Generalissimus' mode, to lay aside class antagonism in favor of the unifying myth of Russian patriotism:

You see, this old Mother Russia of ours is providentially blessed with a most rudimentary organism. Cut her into six pieces, and the six will live on... We cannot be invaded, and this is something intuited by the rudest yokel of the Irtysh, confusedly and then with sudden clarity while defending a wood with his trusty automatic rifle and nimble legs, always quick to run away, but only so as to turn and charge again. His tactics are all in his nerves, without quixotism or panache: only by killing the enemy can he lay hands on enemy boots and vitamin pills, and thus our very deprivation becomes a source of strength, a primordial strength as irrational as life, and imperfectly understood by the strategists of the old industrial empires...

Meanwhile, Berlin is undergoing the opposite mass psychological transformation, from a city of victory and triumphalism to a city of defeat and pathos. Serge takes a marked risk by peopling the German chapter mainly with innocents who were as manipulated and brainwashed by their government as the Russians were by theirs; for him there is no such thing as 'collective guilt' for World War II, and this is at least

WEISS | On Victor Serge's Unforgiving Years

partly why *Le Monde* concluded that *Unforgiving Years* 'prefigured and preceded post-war German literature.' Brigitte, his central character in 'Brigitte, Lightning, Lilacs,' is an enchanting naif, more impressed and terrified by the pyrotechnics of Allied bombers than messianic notions of *Anschluss* or race theory. Her obsession, and the cause of her impending madness, is the death of her fiancé at the front – he was shot for returning alive after his tank unit had been ordered to sacrifice itself for the good of Fatherland. Had he survived the charge of treason, he would still have told his beloved of utter meaninglessness pushing their side deeper and deeper into the abyss. Brigitte reads from his letters, in which he recounts watching Jews herded into boxcars, emitting 'asphyxiated howls' as on-looking S.S. soldiers are plied with good brandy. Brigitte's fiancé is never given a name, and he comes to realise too late that popular movements dependent on supposed 'laws' or tyrannical jurists can only bring about their own demise, the 'banality of chaos':

Systems are such heavy chains that they exonerate the infinitesimal individual, the thinking reed, the trampled reed. What would Pascal or Spinoza have done in Dachau? Or at the front, under a helmet? The reed stops thinking, becomes malleable matter, identifies with its chains.

The point holds if one replaces Dachau with Kolyma or Solovki. But Serge, unlike Vasily Grossman in his war epic *Life and Fate*, never quite articulates the moral equivalence between Fascism and Communism. Instead, Serge flirts with surface resemblances in what Brigitte's fiancé calls the 'crime of all men' in a more daring and controversial way. The miserable survivors of liberated Berlin are, he writes, like 'larvae emerging from the soil – and they were indistinguishable, on the whole, from the inhabitants of Chicago's slums or any other poverty-stricken corner of the world.' Now *that* wasn't the conventional wisdom in 1946.

Greeman is no doubt correct to suggest that Serge anticipates the vogue school of German victimisation, which now calls attention to the immolation of Dresden and the targeted bombings of heavily populated, mostly working-class and anti-Nazi, neighbourhoods in cities like Hamburg. One might find a comparison between Berlin and Chicago under the present circumstances unseemly, to say the least. True, Serge partakes of a vulgar caricature in the coarse and fat American journalist who pulls into the pulverised capital of the Third Reich with the U.S. Army and starts immediately inquiring if any of the shell-shocked residents there 'feel guilty.' 'No shame, no guilt, not a shred! These folks seem to think we come over, leaving a hundred thousand of our boys underground along the way, just to

sort out their next meal!’ One old lady claims that Dachau is a ‘pretty little town in Bavaria, where they held interesting popular festivals in the old days...’ She professes not to read the newspapers, not that those printed in German would have done her any good. But if this opportunistic leader-writer is intended as a prescient satire on the theory of Hitler’s willing executioners, it is an unsure one. How curious, after all, that the reporter’s question is first directed at Herr Schiff, the mannered and one-dimensional schoolteacher, who pays the Yank back in his own coin: ‘And do you... do you feel guilty for this?’ Schiff may delicately tend his garden amid the rubble – the ‘lilacs’ of this chapter’s title belong to him – but he is anything but uninformed about National Socialism, or blameless himself. We’re earlier told that he greets his classes of ten- to fourteen-year-olds ‘with martially outstretched arm and a resounding *Heil Hitler!* that could compete with the great rallies in Nuremberg,’ which I daresay is more than just a pantomime to appease the Gestapo. Is it sloppiness or boldness that allows Serge to put his humanist critique on pan-destruction and what would we now callously call ‘collateral damage’ in the mouth of an Aryan supremacist?

Our author may be in the company of W.G. Sebald on the question of aggressor’s suffering, but he does not ever flirt with the lower forms of revisionism being trafficked today either credulously or sinisterly by the likes of Nicholson Baker and Patrick J. Buchanan. After all, Grossman, a Soviet Jew who lost his mother to the Nazi abattoir in his Ukrainian hometown of Berdichev, and could claim to have seen the worst of both fanatical regimes up close, allowed his most trenchant comparison between Fascism and Communism in *Life and Fate* to be made by the Obersturmbannführer Liss, who interrogates the Old Bolshevik Mostovskoy in a concentration camp:

A red workers’ flag flies over our People’s State too. We too call people to national Achievement, to Unity and Labour. We say, “The Party expresses the dream of the German worker”; you say, “Nationalism! Labour!” You know as well as we do that nationalism is the most powerful force of our century. Nationalism is the soul of our epoch. And “Socialism in One Country” is the supreme expression of nationalism.

The Holocaust, the vaporisation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the disclosures about the gulag – after such knowledge, what forgiveness? And what certainty? Serge’s only definitive conclusion is that something life-affirming could be excavated from the brutal aftermath of world war, starting with the physical ruins themselves.

WEISS | On Victor Serge's Unforgiving Years

Alain, who has been stationed in Berlin, and has eluded the Gestapo by posing as a 'prisoner-of-war-cum-voluntary-worker-on-sick-leave,' discovers Brigitte strangled to death in her small apartment, her lifeless body resembling nothing so much as a slender-necked figure out of Botticelli. Alain's begun ideological moorings have begun to loosen, just as we knew they would from his earlier encounter with D. A French-speaking ex-sailor has escaped from the Kamatchka penal colony and has educated him on the horrors of the Soviet slave economy. Then he notices the grim beauty of destroyed Berlin,

the shuttered prow of a house in a badly damaged neighbourhood; the tradesmen's entrance was masked by a pair of tall thin walls, leaning toward each other like parodies of the Tower of Pisa, the sparse bricks sagging until the tops nearly touched, a truly comic sight... No imagination, however wild or drunk, could ever conceive the wealth of fantastical architectural effects to be found in bombed-out cities. Kids growing up in them may someday, as these visions mature within them, create a new art that will be neither realistic nor surrealistic, for destruction nurtures a special reality basically close to the unreal. The bog reality of civilization reverted back to first principles, violent death, the dissolution of beings and works, the anxious persistence of a life force free of justification.... Paintings of individual psychological terrors would seem ridiculous here. Start expressing the Great Authentic Terror, or buzz off...

This return to first principles constitutes an artistic revolution in itself, one certified in Mexico, to which Daria repairs after toiling under a secret identity in Germany, to join D and Noemi, now owners of a coffee plantation. She's been reading Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* on the ocean liner to the Americas, and that's as good a primer as any on the naturalist catechism D will impart once she arrives. Now permanently called Bruno, he disdains contemporary literature, preferring scientific works for their greater 'imagination' and their 'dizzying precision,' and he takes botany, evolution, and meteorology as his sources of poetic inspiration:

The fire in the sky first blesses the sap, the loves of insects and birds, the euphoria of the herds, and darting quickness of tadpoles in the ponds... Then the fire in the sky turns to a burning hardness, as though the gods were reminding creation that no euphoria can last and that existence is not just the exultation of being; existence is also ordeal, courage, blind tenacity, hidden resourcefulness.

Death be not proud, for you are always followed by rebirth. 'We observe that true power is not that of darkness, of barrenness, but of life,' Bruno tells Daria, finally over his exasperation. 'All that exists cries, whispers, or sings that we must never despair, for true death does not exist.' I don't know that Serge would ever push his own heterodox worldview that far, but his tough-mindedness joined with his hopefulness in the closing staves of his Memoirs:

I have undergone a little over ten years of various forms of captivity, agitated in seven countries, and written twenty books. I own nothing. On several occasions a press with a vast circulation has hurled filth at me because I spoke the truth. Behind us lives a victorious revolutionary gone astray, several abortive attempts at revolution, and massacres in so great number as to inspire a certain dizziness. And to think that it is not over yet. Let me be done with this digression. Those were the only roads open to us. I have more confidence in humankind and in the future than ever before.

Pessimism is the predominant emotion in men who suffer a fraction of the torments that this permanent revolutionary did throughout his life. His body of work, still relevant and moving more than a decade after the fall of the regime he helped bring to power, and to whose fiercest opponents he was a moral and intellectual lighthouse, is the strongest rebuttal to the idea that 'History to the defeated / May say Alas but cannot help nor pardon.'

Michael Weiss is a writer living in New York. His work appears frequently in *Slate*, *The Weekly Standard*, and *The New Criterion*. His essays on Edmund Wilson and Alfred Kazin appeared in *Democratiya* 12 and 13.