

## Revolutionary Resistance: Victor Serge's *Midnight in the Century*

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In his contribution to the debate in the 1920s about the possibility of proletarian literature developing in the Soviet Union, Victor Serge shared similar critical doubts as those expressed by Leon Trotsky in his book, *Literature and Revolution* (1924). Reflecting the optimism of the new Soviet state, Trotsky imagined a process of revolutionary social and economic development that would relatively quickly transform itself from a proletarian dictatorship to that of a new socialist society in which art and literature would no longer be class-bound:

[A]s the conditions for cultural creation will become more favorable, the proletariat will be more and more dissolved into a Socialist community and will free itself from its class characteristics and thus cease to be a proletariat [...] This seems to lead to the conclusion that there is no proletarian culture and there never will be any and in fact there is no reason to regret this. The proletariat acquires power for the purpose of doing away forever with class culture and to make way for human culture. We frequently seem to forget this. (Trotsky 1960, pp.185-6) <sup>1</sup>

Serge considered these conclusions “definitive”, although he did have “one important reservation” (Serge 2004, p.46). He himself thought that the existence of a proletarian state might be more prolonged than could be predicted (much more than a few decades). In this extended historical perspective, new kinds of revolutionary literature would have more time to develop. According to Serge, it was not only possible but necessary in these circumstances to capture the authentic experience of working-class and peasant life in ways that were pioneering both in terms of literary form and content:

Proletarian literature will only add a crucial element to the spiritual life of the working class (and hence provide invaluable assistance to the diffusion of proletarian thinking, i.e., to revolutionary propaganda in the best sense of the word)

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<sup>1</sup> Although the term ‘proletarian literature’ seems today somewhat dated, there is nevertheless a continuing international commitment to the writing and promotion of working-class literature, which has its origins in this earlier tradition. In a more modern context of contemporary protest literature written and published by collectives of female garment workers in Sri Lanka, Sonali Perera links their work to the debate about gender and class in proletarian literature from the 1930s to the present today: “Since the literary internationalism of the ‘radical’ 1930s, the development of proletarian literature beyond short-term political agitation, codings of crisis, and revolutionary romanticism remains an issue for the political and literary history of working-class writing. According to a corpus of representative texts and standard, minimal Marxist definitions, the “proletariat” of proletarian literature is, by definition, revolutionary, by implication, male; this is the specific subset of the working class entrusted with the historic mission of abolishing the class system. Nonrepresentative texts by proletarian women writers from different historical periods propose a more counterintuitive model, one not connected to the conditions and constraints of the revolutionary conjuncture, but to other measurements and templates for thinking socialist ethics”. (Perera (2008) p.1.

if, keeping itself well clear of all the shackles that will be suggested to it, it only imposes on the writer the rule of absolute sincerity towards his comrades and himself. (Serge 2004, p.131) <sup>2</sup>

These combined aspects of radical realism and literary innovation provided the starting point of Serge's own project of revolutionary writing in which he saw himself as a militant, first-hand chronicler of the 20<sup>th</sup> century class struggle. However, there was not only the challenge of the historical and sociological veracity of what he wrote, but also of the experimental narrative strategies he would adopt in order to fuse literature and politics for a revolutionary world in the making.<sup>3</sup>

As a member of the Left Opposition struggling against the counter-revolution both in Europe and the Soviet Union, Serge turned to the writing of novels that sought to portray these turbulent and ultimately tragic events in which he himself was directly involved. These include his trilogy, 'Victory-in-Defeat. Defeat-in-Victory', the first volume of which covered the five years he spent as an anarchist incarcerated in France, *Men in Prison* (1930); the second volume, *Birth of Our Power* (1931), portrayed a failed uprising of Spanish workers; and finally his stay in Petrograd during the first beleaguered year of Soviet power became the subject of *Conquered City* (1932). These novels reflect Serge's early attempts to forge a new kind of revolutionary writing in which a militant materialist understanding of the link between the personal and the political informed the whole dramatic narrative.

In this context of literature and revolution I want to explore some of these political and aesthetic concerns more specifically in a discussion of Serge's later novel, *Midnight in the Century* (1939), about the life of Left Oppositionists in one of the many penal colonies in the Urals. I have chosen this work, since it represents one of the most ambitious early attempts to document the deportation and exile of these revolutionaries, as well as their rearguard resistance to the stalinist betrayal of the Bolshevik revolution.

Given the limitations imposed on him as a prisoner himself in Siberian exile, both in terms of writing and publishing, Serge was compelled to find new ways of composing his novels which

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<sup>2</sup> In Serge's view, proletarian literature was always a question of authenticity, of finding a voice that was both individual and collective, representing the typical experience of the working class. In his own writings on *Literature and Revolution* (1932), he gave the following detailed advice to working-class activists who wanted to become writers: "The strength of the working-class movement resides in its militants. The majority know how to express themselves – obviously, not in literature – often far better – when it is a question of what they know well; their trade, their industry, their trade union, their party or their region. There is not one who has not been active in struggles, on various grounds. Why have they not written about what they have experienced? For them it would often be a new way of continuing the work. They should always be on guard against two dangers: those of literary imitation and of agitation. Express yourself with simplicity, truth and sincerity, look for the finest exactitude, not 'make literature', steer clear of fine phrases, and not go in for romancing" (Serge 2004, p.131).

<sup>3</sup> Victor Serge was born in Belgium in 1890, the son of Russian parents. In 1906 he joined a Brussels' anarchist group and was eventually arrested and given 5 years imprisonment. In 1918 he travelled to Soviet Russia where he joined the Bolshevik Party. In 1923 he became a member of the anti-stalinist Left Opposition organised by Trotsky. Serge was expelled from the Russian Communist Party in 1928 and later spent three years in a labour camp in the Urals. Released in 1936, he lived in France working as a journalist, novelist and active member of the Left Opposition. He was also the French translator of Trotsky's writings. When the nazis invaded France in 1940, Serge escaped to Mexico arriving soon after the assassination of Trotsky by a stalinist agent. Serge died in 1947 leaving several unpublished book manuscripts including his now classic novel, *The Case of Comrade Tulayev* and his autobiography, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*.

would correspond to the fragmented and dispersed nature of the lives of Oppositionists in the camps. It was clear for example that his books might have to be smuggled out of Soviet Russia in small packages that could be reassembled later. This gave him the idea of developing a kind of writing that would weave together political discussion, analysis and the depiction of daily life in order to reflect the combined conditions of physical constriction and limited intellectual freedom among his comrades in prison:

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. (Serge 1975, p.263)

Serge was most certainly aware of the modernist literary experimentation that had previously emerged both within Russia and internationally. John Dos Passos' 'camera technique' interested him in particular, as did the abrupt, defamiliarizing association of imagery and language developed by avantgarde Russian writers like Boris Pilniak. Serge was especially influenced by their zooming in and out of scenes and themes. He also adopted the cross-cutting montage effects associated with the Soviet film director, Sergei Eisenstein, in order to capture the dramatic contrast of individual and collective consciousness. As Neal Cornwell comments: "Serge uses here a linked episodic technique [...] to provide a multi-viewpoint vista on the events of his time" (Cornwell 2000, p.71). At the same time, while acknowledging the "powerful impression of social dynamism" in Dos Passos' *Manhattan Transfer* (Serge 2004, p.54), Serge nevertheless wanted to dig deeper in order to uncover the ideological motivations behind the way people think and act. According to his biographer, "Serge resolved to write in a certain way. He eschewed the personal and sentimental; he wrote about great historical events, in which the actions of the masses, not a single character, drove the plot" (Weissman 2001, p.111).

Despite his early skepticism about the creation of a specifically proletarian literature, Serge's own writing nevertheless reflected the powerful impact of radical cultural initiatives that emerged in the wake of the Russian revolution. These included the efforts of 'Proletkult' activists in promoting working-class and peasant writers; the provocative visual and poetic aesthetics of Futurists like Vladimir Mayakovsky, Kazimir Malevich and Natalia Goncharova; as well as the decisively supportive attitude of the Bolshevik government towards different forms of literary and artistic experimentation. This represented a broad cultural revolution that left a lasting impression on Serge, who later declared that "[b]etween 1921 and 1928 Soviet literature had its glorious season of full flower" (Serge, 1975, p.266). Philip Bounds also notes how extraordinary this convergence of grassroots activism and revolutionary state-sponsorship was during this period: "For much of the early period it looked as if the Bolsheviks were throwing their weight behind the modernist camp. Narkompros, the government department with responsibility for education and the arts, gave massive subsidies to the *avant-garde* and appointed leading modernists to positions of special cultural influence [...] The propaganda materials which conveyed the government message during the Civil war were dominated by Constructivist and Futurist styles" (Bounds 2012, p.62).<sup>4</sup> It was moreover this generation of revolutionary artists and writers with which Serge felt himself most fully identified:

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<sup>4</sup> See further in Rosenberg, *Bolshevik Visions* (1990).

Many of the ideas he had expressed when criticizing or admiring other Russian writers, ideas about style and structure, were incorporated into his own novels, which were ideological at their core. The literary legacy of the Russian writers from this period survived in Serge's work. (Weissman 2001, p.71)

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In his study of *The Radical Twenties*, John Lucas makes a throwaway comment that "Proletarian novels, which are usually as formally unadventurous as their politics are drably defeatist, become a notable feature of writing in the 1930s" (Lucas 1997, p.238). This critical assessment is not completely fair, however, since there were significant examples of experimental working-class novels not least in Britain: James Hanley's *The Furys* (1935), John Sommerfield's *May Day* (1936), Arthur Calder-Marshall's *Pie in the Sky* (1937) and Lewis Grassic Gibbon's trilogy, *A Scots Quair* (1932-4). These were highly successful radical works that rejected the stereotyped notions of proletarian 'agitprop' writing. This was also the case elsewhere. For example, the work of pioneering proletarian novelists in Sweden, such as Harry Martinson, Eyvind Johnson, Moa Martinson and Artur Lundkvist, stood at the forefront of the Scandinavian modernist movement. Moreover, in Soviet Russia, before the adoption of the stalinist policy of 'socialist realism' in 1934,<sup>5</sup> there was clearly an ambition among writers to combine the social and political orientation of proletarian literature with a range of avantgarde modes of artistic expression. As a French-Russian author himself, Serge was to become one of the most outstanding European representatives of this radical modernist ambition to break from the naturalistic traditions of 19<sup>th</sup> century novel writing.

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Accused of being a leading Trotskyist, Serge was arrested, imprisoned, interrogated and finally deported in 1933 to Orenburg in Central Asia where he and his son Vlady (who had accompanied him) nearly starved to death. After a prolonged international campaign for their release, which was supported by prominent pro-Soviet writers like Romain Rolland, André Gide and André Malraux, they were finally allowed to leave the prison camp in 1936. Deprived of his Soviet citizenship as well his book manuscripts, he returned to Europe where he continued to be slandered in the communist press. Serge spent the next two years writing about his first-hand recollections of the Gulag and of imprisoned Bolshevik comrades who had seen the hopes of their revolution brutally betrayed by Stalin. The dark yet defiant significance of the title of his novel, *Midnight in the Century*, is revealed in a short exchange between two of the Bolshevik prisoners in the camp: "What's to be done if it's midnight in the century?" 'Midnight's where we have to live then'" (Serge 2015, p.118). Although they had no illusions about fundamentally challenging the power of political reaction gaining ground everywhere, these revolutionaries nevertheless remained stoically prepared to endure its ravages. Perhaps not surprisingly, when it was published on the eve of the Second World War, Serge's novel was considered too somber, literally and psychologically, a criticism to which he replied by insisting on the underlying radical resonances of the account:

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<sup>5</sup> See further, *Soviet Writers Congress* (1977).

I did not wish it so. I wanted only to be truthful, I even made efforts to include all the muted, secret, tenacious light that I have never ceased to see among the men of the Russian soil. I would have liked to end it on a note of hope, and I believe it is there. (Quoted in Greeman 2015 p. xiii)

Serge's biographer also writes that "*Midnight in the Century* [...] is a work of optimism despite grim conditions", depicting a group of revolutionaries whose lives were precarious, but who nevertheless continued to maintain their moral integrity and collective solidarity:

Even in the worst conditions, while revolutionaries were stabbed in the back by their own Party, while fascism reared its ugly head and capitalism, gripped by depression, plunged towards war, Serge's novel reaffirmed the revolutionary spirit and bright political intelligence of his comrades. Even though it *was* midnight in the century, Serge showed morning dawning with the escape of young Rodion, who represented the new revolutionary worker. (Weissman 2001, p.152)

Richard Greeman, the translator of Serge's work from the French, describes it as "perhaps Serge's most poignant and moving novel" (Greeman 2015, p. xi), whose overriding theme is more spiritual than revolutionary. Greeman traces a political trajectory of Serge at this time "from anarchism through syndicalism, Bolshevism, and Trotskyism to a kind of socialist humanism" (Greeman 2015, p.viii). However, what this 'kind of socialist humanism' actually involves is difficult to pin down, although it seems to indicate a direction away from marxism and more towards social liberalism. Serge's development in Greeman's view appears therefore to point to a fundamental rejection of the Russian revolution. Greeman also uses the novel to identify a shift in Serge's writing towards more abstract existential preoccupations. These are associated with the metaphysics of what Greeman characterizes as "eternal heresy and eternal persecution" (Greeman 2015, p.xv). He locates this theme specifically in an encounter towards the end of the novel between Rodion, one of the main Oppositional figures in the camp, and a religious mystic:

[T]here is a translucent moment of silent communion between the young Trotskyite (sic) and an Old Believer. This epiphany, for which Serge has carefully and lovingly prepared, takes place under streaming stars in a mystical atmosphere of biblical simplicity. It is a Marxist materialist's homage to spirituality (Greeman 2015, p.xvi).<sup>6</sup>

Although this represents only a brief moment in the narrative, Greeman reads much into it as the culmination of all other political plot elements. In this exchange, Rodion calls to the old man to come with him when he plans his escape from their prison cell. He refuses: "*No. Why should I flee? Flee what? But you, since the cool night calls you, go. Follow your heart's desire, may God help you!*" (Serge 2015, p.200). While there is certainly something touching about the interaction between the two prisoners, Greeman's claim that it stands out as "the novel's climactic scene" (Greeman 2015, p.xvi) seems both overstated and unconvincing, not least politically. I will

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<sup>6</sup>In his introduction to a collection of Serge's writings on anarchism, *Anarchists Never Surrender* (2015), Greeman claims that Serge basically remained an anarchist all his life: "Victor the Maverick was indeed one of those anarchists who 'never surrender'. He lived and died an internationalist, an individualist, and an enemy of the state" (Greeman 2015, p.x).

return therefore to the significance of Rodion's escape later in relation to my own reading of the overall 'message' of the novel.<sup>7</sup>

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The narrative begins with a man, Kostrov, being arrested and entering the prison system. It ends with another man, Rodion, escaping from the penal colony. Both are active in the Left Opposition. Kostrov, who is a University Professor of Historical Materialism, has been a member of the Bolshevik Party since 1917. He is nevertheless deeply critical of the stalinist policy of forced collectivization, warning that "in its present form with all its violence and disorder, will end up by turning the entire peasantry against the dictatorship of the proletariat" (Serge 2015, p.43). He is also accused of including "counter-revolutionary propaganda" (Serge 2015, p.44) in his university course on the French revolution.

In his prison record, Rodion is described as a committed revolutionary who has become a thorn in the side of the Party: "Rodion: truck driver at the Penza bicycle factory compromised for having questioned the inequality of wages. Note in his file: 'Pernicious agitator, dangerous demagogue, Trotskyist. Knows how to make the masses listen to him'" (Serge 2015, p.68). In both cases, these characters are defined by their commitment to the revolution and their criticisms of Party policy. They both think in explicitly political terms and this affects the way they adapt to conditions of deportation and exile. While he is waiting to be interrogated, Kostrov is placed in a communal cell, called 'Chaos', together with dozens of other prisoners of all categories. What strikes the reader throughout Serge's novel (and this is also the case in his earlier work, *Men in Prison*), is the way prisoners are shown trying to make life easier for each another. There is also a pronounced state of hostile co-existence between two uneven power blocks – the prison authorities and the prisoners themselves. In Kostrov's case, he notices immediately the way the bunk beds in the cell have been moved so as to create a common walkway: "In order to move, a narrow space along the back wall was reserved by mutual agreement, with everyone, seated or standing, squeezing up against his neighbour. It was called the boulevard, and each, in his turn, had the right to take a little walk on it" (Serge 2015, p.27).<sup>8</sup>

When his transferred to a cell of his own, despite the physical improvements, Kostrov finds himself longing back to the companionship of the bigger cell: "I was wrong to complain about

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<sup>7</sup> In a short pamphlet, published in 1978 and entitled, *Victor Serge: Writer and Activist*, Greeman offers a rather different appraisal of the novel's radical content: "*S'il est minuit dans le siècle* [...] is a testament to Marxist faith in the revolutionary potential of the masses which contrasts sharply with Koestler's abstract pessimism in *Darkness at Noon*, published the same year". (Greeman 1978, p.5) Similarly, Serge's biographer, Susan Weissman, comments: "It has been suggested that Koestler's famous novel of the purges, *Darkness at Noon*, was influenced by Serge's *Midnight in the Century*. Although the content is more frequently compared with *The Case of Comrade Tulayev*, the titles themselves have been the subject of an interesting analysis by Bill Marshall [1992]. While the titles seem to parallel each other, Marshall points to a subtle, but significant difference – in Serge's novel light triumphs over dark, while Koestler, taking his title from Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, emphasizes darkness obliterating light" (Weissman 2001. p.152)

<sup>8</sup> Paul Gordon also comments on the defiance of the prisoners portrayed by Serge: "The prison also did all it could to kill any living relationship between prisoners. Communication between the inmates, as in the use of the 'telephone', using the wastepipes of the building, was especially severely punished. But even something as banal as whistling, humming, talking to yourself out loud were prohibited, as these too were signs of life, however pathetic. Of course, prisoners disobeyed, but they did so in a situation of considerable fear that they would be caught". (Gordon 2013, p.14)

Chaos. Ah! [...] The silence was crushing him [...] Chaos's odour of human animals and rough tobacco. Nostalgia for all that caught in his throat" (Serge 2015, p.36). This theme of survival through group solidarity runs throughout the whole of the novel, representing a physical and psychological counterculture that has also wider political implications.

Kostrov's prolonged isolation not only produces psychosomatic chest pains, he also begins to fall into despair, which eventually undermines his decision not to confess to any of the crimes he is accused of. However, the reign of stalinist terror appears in his mind as fatally irrevocable: "Fill the jails with devoted men since everything is going to pieces. Start again from the beginning. And then? Then they'll begin killing us off. They won't make the mistake of letting us live on in prison. Then what? Hold out anyway. Maybe a few will survive. But the cowards? Those who are tired?" (Serge 2015, p.48). After being cut off from contact with other prisoners for several months, Kostrov finally loses his resolve to resist.

Kostrov's personal failure is also thematically connected to the period of political defeats which the novel looks back on: the failed German revolution of 1921, the massacre of the Chinese communists in 1926 and the rise of fascism in Italy, Spain and Germany. The world revolution was clearly in retreat and this also contributed to the consolidation of stalinism in Russia. In the end, Kostrov succumbs and agrees to sign a kafkaesque confession of guilt in which he retracts all his previous criticisms of the regime. However, even though this seems to indicate a complete loss of revolutionary conscience, his bitter rationalization of his own betrayal suggests it is only a tactical disavowal in order to survive:

The next morning he asked for paper to write to the Central Committee – and wrote out one more surrender. All the right words were there: The edification of socialism, the great wisdom of the C.C., the correctness of its tactics, the repudiation of errors due to a lack of understanding, to the petty-bourgeois spirit, to the counter-revolutionary influence of ex-comrades now denounced and repudiated. He wrote it out with his features clenched, his mouth pursed into an expression at once bad-tempered and scornful. When he had finished, he swallowed his saliva, began a smile which ended in a yawn, stretched, and heard himself say out loud: 'Go on, you rotten fraud!' (Serge 2015, p. 50)<sup>9</sup>

It is however a capitulation that elicits no promise of leniency from his persecutors. On the contrary, it contributes to him being quickly sent into exile in the camps. In Serge's own real-life case, he continued to resist signing any false admissions of guilt, since he thought it would only provide his captors with the excuse to shoot him. Susan Wiessman describes Serge's stubborn resistance to the manipulations of his interrogators as an existential struggle between his personal fear of an anonymous death and his reluctance to lose faith with his comrades:

The prepared charges were pure 'ravings' and it was clear a trap had been set. Serge knew that one bit of wavering would ensure his doom. He felt utterly alone, he said, and strangled in the dark. He understood that his captors intended to shoot him. Feeling all was lost fortified him. He decided to have nothing to do with their lies, never to give in, never abandon his Communist thought, never worship the

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<sup>9</sup>Later in the camp, Kostrov seems to recover his revolutionary credentials when he is welcomed into the community of the comrades: "'Kostrov?' 'Yes.' 'A good comrade, educated, you know. It's a pleasure to ask him things. He has answers for everything, a real Marxist.' 'One of us, or what?' Rodion hesitated a little. 'He signed something, I think, but he's one of us.'" (Serge 2015, p.116)

gravedigger of the revolution, never approve the rebirth of privilege nor the boundless misery of workers and peasants. (Serge 2015, p.148)

In this section of the novel, Serge explores the psychology of confinement and confession and how even seasoned revolutionaries could be coerced into admitting to all sorts of impossible crimes. He locates their seemingly irrational response in the deep-seated allegiance they still felt towards the Party. At the same time, no one could predict how they would react to imprisonment and torture. In his later poem, 'Confession', Serge writes with equal compassion for both those who resisted and those who relented:

Believe our confessions, join in our vow  
of complete obedience: scorn our disavowals.  
Once put down, the old revolt is nothing but obedience.  
May those who are less devoted be proud,  
May those who have forgiven themselves be proud,  
May those who are more devoted be proud,  
May those who have not given up be proud. (Weissman 2001, p.201)

Although the novel begins with Kostrov, he returns later only sporadically once in exile as Serge's attention shifts in order to explore the dynamics of dissent among the whole group of Left Oppositionists in the prison colony. At this point, the novel becomes an act of remembrance of the lives of these fellow prisoners who Serge had left behind in the camps: their hunger, hardships and persecution by the guards. It was, as Paul Gordon comments, an act of "testimony to what he had experienced, what he had seen" (Gordon 1998 p.50). Since Serge was one of the few who physically survived the terrible conditions of the colony in Orenburg, he felt it was his moral obligation to at least partially recover their life stories in the pages of his novel:

In my novel *S'i est Minuit dans le Siècle* I have taken some pains to recapture the spiritual atmosphere of deportation. Journeying over the years from prison to prison, from exile to exile, tormented by privation, these comrades kept their revolutionary faith, their good spirits, their sparkling political intelligence. (Serge 1975, p.307)

The book is therefore a portrayal of the generation of Bolsheviks to which Serge himself belonged and who faced complete annihilation in the stalinist purges. Serge wanted nevertheless to show their continued revolutionary dedication to socialism, their restricted but still vibrant political democracy, their unshaken faith in the working class and the traditions of marxist thinking that had enabled the Bolshevik Party to realize the greatest social, political and economic revolution the world had ever seen. Many of these women and men had already endured being imprisoned, tortured and starved in tsarist prisons. Their renewed incarceration in the stalinist camps did not break their determination to continue participating in the fight to recover working-class power in the Soviet state. They acted as they always had done as an integral part of the movement: discussing, analyzing, writing, reading, disseminating ideas and political pronouncements that kept them linked to the oppositional struggle in Russia and abroad. This constitutes the novel's unique recuperation of a lost revolutionary world. As Serge was to comment later: "There is no one left who knows what the Russian Revolution was really like, what the



Bolsheviks were really like – and people judge without knowledge, with bitterness, with simple minded rigidity” (Serge *Life and Death* 2015, p.287).

The main focus of the narrative revolves around six prisoners – Rodion, Elkin, Avelii, Ryzhik, Kostrov and Varvara. They are all associated with the Left Opposition, a political tendency organized by Trotsky to combat the stalinist degeneration of the Soviet Union. The group forms a cell of cadres in exile, all sharing different levels of activism. Varvara, for example, who is the only woman among them, is the personification of their long-established revolutionary commitment: “Never forget that we are the living faction of the Party” (Serge 174).

She is speaking with assurance, without wasting words: ex-student at Sverdlov Communist University, ex-secretary of the factory cell at the Trekhgorka textile plant, ex-political-educator-lecturer at tractor stations in the Northern Caucasus, ex-instructor organizer of agricultural collectives in the Novocherkask district, ex-editor of the *Leninist Voice*, organ of the Workers’ Federation produced by the Leninist contingent in a central prison. (Serge 2015, p.74)

In the camp they form a tight-knit community, unafraid of what the prison authorities can do to them, since they still feel very much committed to the struggle for socialism. They continue to strive for the reconstruction of the workers’ state and the revolutionary traditions to which it belonged. Although Serge himself did not arrive in Russia and join the Bolshevik Party until 1918, he completely identified with and worked for it, despite his previous anarchist sympathies. His son Vlady later claimed that the character of Ryzhik in the novel, was in part a portrait of his own father (Weissman 2001, p.153).

The militant Party involvement that these cadres had maintained for years continues in prison. They participate in political debates, both national and international, about the perspectives and tactics of the world revolution. Despite their geographical isolation, they still feel united in the fight against bureaucratic privilege and power. This was one of the key narrative elements that Serge incorporated into his novel. The modernist preoccupation with the fragmentary workings of the mind turns in Serge’s narrative into a novel of thoughts, ideas and political engagement in which characters live an inner and outer life that moves intrinsically from day-to-day concerns about the reduced bread ration to debating Trotsky’s theory of permanent revolution.

One of the most significant of their recurrent political exchanges is linked to the situation in Germany, where the victory of Nazism had exposed the catastrophic consequences of Stalin’s policy of attacking the Social Democratic Party as ‘social fascist’, thus allowing Hitler to take power on the back of a divided labour movement. Trotsky had called very early on for an anti-capitalist united front between social democratic and communist workers as the way to defeat fascism. The prisoners in the novel discuss this issue as though they themselves were on the frontline in Germany. It is also striking how they link the triumph of fascism in Germany directly to the consolidation of stalinism in the Soviet Union:

An argument begins between Elkin and Ryzhik over the united front in Germany [...] Elkin went on: ‘The Old Man’s [Trotsky - RP] theses are correct – the only chance for salvation is a common front with the Social Democracy and the Reformist trade-unions. It’s madness to expect to win the masses away from their leaders, when the proletarian spirit has become stabilized within the old parties [...] There are singular congruencies between the two dictatorships. Stalin gave Hitler his strength by driving the middle classes away from Communism with the

nightmare of forced collectivization, famine, and terror against the technicians. Hitler, by making Europe abandon the hope of socialism, will strengthen Stalin. These grave-diggers were born to understand each other. Enemies and brothers. In Germany, one is burying an aborted democracy, the child of an aborted revolution. In Russia, the other is burying a victorious revolution born of a weak proletariat and left on its own by the rest of the world. Both of them are leading those they serve – the bourgeoisie in Germany, the bureaucracy here at home – toward a catastrophe.’ (Serge 2015, p.75-6)

This elaborate marxist analysis is not just a product of the political life of the comrades in the penal colony. It also forms part of the revolutionary interventions of Left Oppositionists in camps everywhere. Contact with others and the reciprocation of news and analysis are sustained through smuggled messages, letters, reports, articles, leaflets and books that are written, read, memorized and passed on. Moreover, their connections abroad allow them to continue being informed of what is going on in the world. It is a culture of clandestine communication that the prison authorities are powerless to suppress, as Serge shows in this remarkable passage of literary documentation of the revolutionary underground:

They are the probable curves of the pathways down which dangerous ideas are spreading. They radiate like stars starting from the Central Prisons for political offenders – imperfect isolators in which thought has still not been extinguished. From there they reach the concentration camps, the exile colonies, the shacks on the shores of the White Sea, the monastery on the Solovietski Isles, this forsaken house at the foot of Mount Ararat, that sandy hamlet on the edge of the Hungry Steppe, *Golodnaya Stiep*, where the author of *Theses on the Stalinist Counter-Revolution*, published by a hand-written review at Suzdal Prison, has just been sent for three years. But during the course of a transfer, at the Cheliabinsk Detention Centre in the Ural region, he met two men and a woman to whom he explained these theses in person. Today one of the two men is at Yakutsk in the North of East Asia; the other is in Karelia; the woman, arrested again in the fifth month of exile, is in the Verkhne-Uralsk Central Prison. And it is probably through her that the prison came to know these theses whose influence can be found in those of the Left of the Trotskyist convicts’ faction ... Thus another star lights up in another prison. From here, the heresy shines out again over the whole USSR. (Serge 2015, pp.153-4)

The central figure in all this is the young Trotskyist factory worker, Rodion. He personifies the new ‘Beginning’, the section that is at the ideological core of the whole novel. His thoughts and actions play a decisive role the last great debate among the members of the Oppositionist cell. Facing a further wave of stalinist repression which will probably mean their execution, Rodion argues for a fundamental shift in their attitude towards the Party, whose revolutionary ideals are being wiped out by Stalin. While the rest of the group choose to remain loyal to the task of reforming the Party, Rodion rejects this objective since he believes its political and moral decay has gone too far. His argument is instead, and this, I would say, forms the main political conclusion of the book: for the continued unconditional defence of the workers’ state but also for a complete replacement of the stalinist Party by a new democratic working-class organization based on the Soviets. It is a radical change of perspective that his comrades find hard to accept, having been dedicated to the Party all their political lives. Symbolically however, it is they who go with grim

resignation to the firing squads that await them, while Rodion is the one who decides to escape into the forest in order to fight another day. In their parting discussion, Rodion rejects his comrades' idea of a reconstituted Communist Party, counterposing instead the need for a new, grass-roots political re-orientation:

Jailors and prisoners, we are still members of the same Party: the only Party of the Revolution. They are debasing it, leading it to ruin. We are resisting in order to save it in spite of them. The only way we can appeal against the sick Party, controlled by *parvenus*, is by appealing to the healthy Party ... But where is it? Where? Who is it? And what if it were outside the Party? The true workers' Party, outside of parties ... But is this possible? [...] 'Listen to me! It's no longer true: something has been lost forever. Lenin will never rise again in his mausoleum. Our only brothers are the working people who no longer have either rights or bread. They're the ones we must talk to. It is with them that we must remake the Revolution and first of all a completely different Party...' The comrades appeared livid to him in the falling shadows: Varvara, Avelii, heads pressed close together. (Serge 2015, p.174-5) <sup>10</sup>

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In his pioneering survey of Serge life and work, Richard Greeman places *Midnight in the Century* in Serge's cycle of novels dealing with exile and defeat, but also hope against hope: "And yet the effect of this journey from prison to prison is not one of despair. Underlying it all there is a permanent and collective protagonist of conscious revolutionaries, what Serge once called 'the invisible international' or more commonly 'the comrades'. This entity tends to merge with a large collective, the masses – workers, poor farmers, student youth, beggars, bandits and madmen – who are ever present in Serge's novels" (Greeman 1991 n.p.).

Continuing Serge's idea of an 'invisible international', I would argue that the most significant point of the narrative occurs in the very last paragraph. This is where Rodion, after having successfully escaped from the prison camp, comes to a small town where he joins a work brigade on a building site. His job is to carry bricks up the scaffolding to the masons. He struggles with this until a young woman shows him how to stack the bricks properly on his shoulders. Once at the top of the building she also gives him some brandy to drink. The view of the surrounding landscape and the comradely gestures of this working-class woman trigger a radical projection of Russia, its burden of history, political oppression and powers of regeneration. This is the real revolutionary climax of the novel in which the woman appears as a symbol of the irrepressible workers and peasants of Russia. In Rodion's mind, this point of contact between individual and collective comes finally together in a vision of both human suffering and struggle:

'Feeling better?' she asked. The corners of the grey kerchief knotted under her chin were fluttering in the breeze. Her tall form stood out over the scaffolding, and behind her there was nothing but airy space, plains, and Russian earth, the tortured earth of the Revolution, its black waters, its clouded waters, its clear waters, its

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<sup>10</sup> The collapse of the Soviet Union has not negated the novel's central point about the need for a new independent working-class party. This revolutionary demand is still an urgent one, not only in former communist countries like Russia, but also in places like the U. S. where there is an obvious lack of a genuine workers' party based on the trade unions.

frozen waters, its deadly waters, its invigorating waters, its enchanted forests, its mud, its impoverished villages, its countless living prisoners, its countless executed ones in graves, its construction sites, its masses, its solitudes and all the seeds germinating in its womb. Rodion saw it all, ineffably. All – even the germinating seeds, since they too are real. And that the woman drinking brandy from the bottle at that instant was truly, totally, a human being. He was entranced to see it so clearly. (Serge 2015, p.217) <sup>11</sup>

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Thanks to the indefatigable efforts of Richard Greeman, both in translating Serge and promoting his literary achievement, Serge's writing has not only been made widely available to an English-speaking readership, his work has also become incorporated in the anti-stalinist canon of texts exposing the totalitarian crimes committed in the Soviet Union. However, it also needs to be reiterated that Serge distinguished himself in this context by being one of the few Soviet writers of his generation who never lost faith in the socialist liberation of humanity. The very last book he completed only a few days before he died in 1947, *The Life and Death of Leon Trotsky*, which he wrote together with Trotsky's widow, Natalia Sedova, was clearly a final symbolic act of solidarity with Trotsky's fight against stalinism. On the last page of the manuscript, Serge wrote:

Leon Davidovich Trotsky had devoted a long life of toil, thought and unflinching struggle against inhumanity to the workers' cause. All who knew him realized that he thought of himself as no more than an instrument in the performance of a great historic task, a task he shared with all the socialist masses conscious of the dangers and the opportunities of our age. (Serge, *Life and Death* 2015, p.269)

In response to the many conflicting ideological attempts to co-opt Serge as one of their own, from anarchist to Cold War warrior, Susan Weissman concludes her biography of Serge by stating that "his political trajectory, his writings and life experience were unique in the revolutionary movement. His revolutionary integrity and dedication to humanity were not negotiable, were in fact beyond compromise" (Weissman 2001, p. 277). As I have tried to show in this discussion of what is without doubt one of his greatest political novels, Serge saw himself ultimately as a revolutionary writer and activist who sought to keep the flame of socialism burning throughout some of the darkest years of the last century.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Paul Gordon writes: "Solidarity for Serge, was not some romanticized, idealistic notion. It was very much a reality and something he experienced, again and again, throughout his life. Recalling some of the people he met while in exile in Orenburg, most of them probably dead, he says, 'I am grateful to them for having existed, and because they incarnated an epoch'". (Gordon 2013, p.59)

<sup>12</sup> In another personal tribute to Trotsky, which he published in 1943, Serge wrote: "He was killed at the very moment that the modern world entered, through the war, a new phase of his 'permanent revolution.' He was killed just for that reason, for he might have played too great a historical role, had he ever been able to return to the land and the people of that Russia he understood so profoundly." Reprinted as an appendix, "In Memory of Leon Trotsky", in Serge, *The Life and Death of Leon Trotsky*, (2015, p. 294).

Despite Serge's own profound respect for Trotsky, Trotsky himself never acknowledged either the cultural or political significance of Serge's literary writings. Indeed, there is little or no indication that Trotsky ever read any of them, as Richard Greeman notes: "Yet although Trotsky was passionately interested in French literature and professed a special tolerance for works of the imagination, one looks in vain for any allusions to Serge's novels or

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other creative work in his voluminous writings. Indeed, one wonders if Trotsky ever read any of Serge's literary works" Greeman, 'Did Trotsky Read Serge' (1999, p. 146).

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