

# Reviews

## THE MORROW OF VICTORY

by Tamara Deutscher

**Year One of the Russian Revolution**, by Victor Serge, translated and edited by Peter Sedgwick (Holt, Rinehart and Winston).

It was only in the "Year Two" of the Russian Revolution that Victor Serge, like so many foreign communists, went, full of hope and enthusiasm, to the promised land of the Soviets. "We are revolutionaries—we are going to Russia," they proudly declared to any chance acquaintance met on their voyage to the Finland Station. "We are leaving the void, and entering the kingdom of will . . . A land awaits us where life is beginning anew, where free will, enlightenment and an inexorable love of mankind are in action. Behind us all Europe is ablaze, having choked almost to death in the fog of its own massacres."

For Serge this was, in addition, a return to the country of his revolutionary forefathers: less than three decades before, a relative of his father, the brilliant scientist-engineer-inventor N. Kibalchich, was hanged, in 1881, together with Zhelyabov and Perovskaya, for his part in the attempt on the life of Tsar Alexander II. Serge's father, himself involved in the Narodniks' struggle, escaped from Russia to the comparative "free-will and enlightenment" of Western Europe. Victor Kibalchich-Serge was born in Belgium in 1890 and had rebellion in his bloodstream. Not for him the bourgeois stolidity of Belgium—at the age of 20 he fled to Paris. There he edited *Anarchie*, a little Individualist weekly, became involved with the "Bonnot bandits" who were led by their highly idealistic motives into senseless terroristic acts—Serge was attracted by the former and repelled by the latter.

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French justice, unable to comprehend the subtle dichotomy, confined him to jail for five years. Released from prison and expelled from France, he went to Barcelona and plunged into the insurrectionist street fighting of 1917.

To him as individualist-anarchist-syndicalist, the Marxist view of the world was alien and uncongenial, yet the call of the class struggles in Russia became irresistible. He tried to reach Petrograd via France. But the French saw in him a "Bolshevik suspect" and put him behind the barbed wires of a concentration camp. Only after the Armistice was he released and exchanged for a French officer interned by the Soviet government.

He reached Russia in January 1919. The confrontation of revolutionary dream with revolutionary reality produced a shock: "We were entering a world frozen to death," he wrote in his Memoirs. What he saw were "dead houses . . . abandoned city . . . a gaunt soldier . . . a woman freezing under her shawls . . . starving horses . . . passers-by eaten by cold and hunger . . . faces ghastly white . . ." His enthusiasm became thickly overlaid with anguish.

And yet enthusiasm and hope prevailed. With all his energy and fervour he rallied to the defence of the revolution—first, arms in hand, in a Communist battalion; then, pen in hand, in the work for the Communist International. Right from the start the political and intellectual discipline of the Bolsheviks jarred on his individualist-libertarian and artistic-Bohemian attitudes. In spite of this, he joined the Soviet Communist Party in 1919, at a time when the party was still tolerant enough to allow, and even to welcome, a dissident in its ranks. Soon, however, the party's "tolerance" decreased rapidly, while Serge's unorthodoxy was, understandably, growing apace. By 1923 he became a firm adherent of the Left Opposition.

Convinced that Revolutionary Russia, bled white, hungry and "in the grip of the Bolshevik dictatorship," was bound to collapse if left to itself, he went to Berlin, on a Comintern assignment, and became an editor of

*Inprekorr*. His duty, as he saw it, was "to build a Western working-class movement capable of supporting the Russians and, one day, superseding them."

In 1926 he returned, however, to the doomed first and only "workers' state." In 1928 he was arrested, then released. In 1933 he was re-arrested and deported to Orenberg in Central Asia. This created a scandal in France, where Serge had already made for himself a name as a novelist, publicist, and pamphleteer. The "*Affaire*" became embarrassing to the Communists and to Stalin. "Friends of the Soviet Union," like André Malraux and Romain Rolland, intervened and in 1936 Serge was allowed to leave Russia for Belgium and France.

From there—all his hopes wilted—he watched the drama of the Spanish civil war, the hypocrisy of the Popular Front, the inexorable defeat of the European left. Small groups of anti-Stalinist communists had Serge's sympathy, but he found that none of them had any fresh insights or positive action to offer. The artist in him felt nearest to Trotsky, the man of vision and "the last survivor of a generation of giants." But Trotsky was a Marxist and a Bolshevik, and it was precisely Marxism and Bolshevism that Serge blamed for the degeneration of the Russian revolution; what he was yearning for was a Declaration of the Rights of Man and a somewhat undefined concept of Liberty.

I have sketched Serge's profile because it is a necessary background to his book, *Year One of the Russian Revolution*, which has just been translated, though it was first published in France in 1930. It might well have as its subtitle "The Revolution at Death's Door" (The expression is Sedgwick's.) It is the profound and intense drama of the victorious revolution fighting for its survival in a country dripping with blood, ravaged by wars, epidemics and famines. Later on, in retrospect, Serge's indictment of this period of Russian history was very harsh indeed: "The only problem which revolutionary Russia, in all the

years from 1917 to 1923, utterly failed to consider was the problem of liberty." (italics mine). No, the "problem" was certainly "considered," but liberty became one of the first victims mortally hit by the avalanche of all the other "problems" which were descending with inexorable force upon the young Republic and threatening to engulf it completely. Serge's own truthful and despairing narrative provides all the evidence that in the "Year One" there was no chance, no possibility to translate into practice his—and the Bolsheviks'—high aspirations and hopes. "The Junkers' Mutiny," "The Cossacks March on Petrograd," "Socialism of the Counter-revolution," "Alcohol," "The Flames of Civil War," "Brest Litovsk," "The White Terror," "In the Face of Famine," "Intervention," "The Left SR Rising"—such are a few subheadings taken at random from Serge's book. Were there any nooks and crannies left in which "liberty" could survive?

Looking back on "Year One" of the revolution, the author was forced by the tragic impact of events to part with (or at least to suspend) his own anarchist bias. With unvarnished exactitude he reports on the murderous activities of the anarchists and on the manner they were dealt with. "Did some of the anarchists think of dealing the besieged Bolsheviks a death-stab in the back?" he asks. His answer follows: "I myself know that a little while previously a meeting of the leaders of the Anarchist Federation had been held at which the possibility of a rising against the Bolsheviks had been discussed." Several attacks, murders and acts of banditry

*"led Dzerzhinsky, the President of the Cheka, to insist on the liquidation of the Black Guard. Five thousand Soviet troops took part in this operation, on the night of 11-12 April. The houses occupied by the anarchists and defended by their machine-guns were surrounded. The occupants were given twenty minutes to surrender. In several places there was bloodshed; artillery was used against the Anarchy Club; the siege of one libertarian citadel lasted ten hours. In this way, 27 houses were taken, 20 groups disarmed and 500 people arrested. The killed and wounded amounted to a*



*Red Guards in the Crimea: January 1918*

*few dozen. No anarchist known as such died in the course of this skirmish, which was followed neither by summary executions (as has been rumoured) nor by other rigorous measures. The daily newspaper Anarkhiya reappeared on the 21st with the headline: "Down with absolutism!"*

The main "operations" against the anarchists and "socialists of counter-revolution" were entrusted to the Extraordinary Commission, the Cheka, which in subsequent years, under various initials like GPU, NKVD, KGB, grew into the ubiquitous and murderous monster that became the symbol (and pillar) of Stalin's autocracy. In the "Year One" the Cheka, under Dzerzhinsky, a man of "ascetic honesty" and a "poet's ardour" had to protect the revolution from real, not imaginary, dangers, because, as Serge graphically puts it, "The soil of the young Republic was being thoroughly mined, in more senses than one." The number of parties bent on destroying the Bolsheviks, which Serge lists, was indeed stupendous: in March the SRs, Mensheviks, and Kadets set up a common League for Renewal; to the right of them were the monarchists and former officers; the Right SRs, who explicitly approved of foreign intervention; the Savinkov League and many other Save-the-Fatherland conspiracies. On the very day that Lenin was shot at and wounded in Moscow, Uritsky was killed; Volodarsky, another Bolshevik leader, had been murdered in June; and only accident helped Trotsky escape an attempt on his life. "External defence must be complemented by defence of the interior," states Serge firmly in his sur-

vey. And yet, later on, he projected the future onto the past and wrote in his *Memoirs*, "I believe that the formation of the Cheka was one of the gravest and most impermissible errors that the Bolshevik leaders committed in 1918, when plots, blockades, and interventions made them lose their heads." On Serge's own showing, without the formation of the Cheka many Bolshevik leaders would have "lost their heads" literally and not figuratively.

The author of *Year One of the Russian Revolution* was not a professional or scholarly historian. This should not, however, detract from its significance for most readers. It is vividly, impressionistically written and conveys admirably the dense and tense atmosphere of the times. Myriads of Western authors writing about Soviet Russia concentrated their attention almost exclusively on the disasters and calamity of Stalinism or viewed pre-Stalin Russia with later events in mind, so that the true story of "Year One" has nearly passed into oblivion.

In July 1936 Trotsky wrote to Serge: "I fear that you have approached these problems in a manner which is too artistic, too psychological, that is to say, not sufficiently political." This is undoubtedly true, though in *Year One* Serge refrains from too much "psychologizing" and in this way offers some correctives to his later writings. He was, however, a novelist *par excellence* and *The Case of Comrade Tulayev* still remains his most brilliant work. ■

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# THE ALMANAC

by Derek Shearer

Although workers' control of participation in the running of factories has been hotly debated in Europe, the issue has scarcely reached public consciousness in the U.S. Senator Kennedy recently announced that his labor subcommittee will attempt to obtain funds for a study of worker alienation and participation in America. Control over working conditions will be a negotiating issue this year for the United Auto Workers in bargaining with the auto companies. The business community has responded with talk about "job enrichment" and "raising productivity through increased worker responsibility."

People interested in this issue can now inform themselves with a new reader titled **Workers' Control: A Reader on Labor and Social Change**, edited by Gerry Hunnius, David Garson and John Case (Random House \$10 hardcover, \$2.95 paper). The book contains reports on workers' participation in Sweden, West Germany and Israel, as well as a description of workers self-management in Yugoslavia. Union officials and radical intellectuals survey the current state of collective bargaining and consider the possibilities for a workers' control movement in the U.S.

Two interesting and useful reports just issued by the U.S. government are relevant to the workers' control debate. A 211-page report titled **Work in America**, prepared for HEW by an independent panel of social scientists, states that unhappiness about the quality of work is widespread among workers and calls for a "redesign of jobs." It has just been published in paperback by MIT Press (\$2.95). In the Senate, the **Subcommittee on Employment, Manpower and Poverty** recently held hearings on worker alienation, chaired by **Teddy Kennedy**, which included testimony by union leaders. Copies of the hearings, titled

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*News of political work, including publications, films, slide shows, etc., should be addressed to Derek Shearer, RAMPARTS magazine, 2054 University Ave., Berkeley, California 94704.*

**Worker Alienation—1972** are available free by writing: Senate Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, Publications, Senate Office Bldg., Capitol Hill, Washington, D.C.

The **Institute for Workers' Control**, in England, publishes many books and pamphlets on the subject not readily available in the U.S. The Institute also puts out a regular **bulletin** on the workers' control movement and a **journal of international studies** on industrial democracy. (To get the Institute's mail order catalog, write: The Partisan Press, Bertrand Russell House, 45 Gamble St., Nottingham NG7 4ET, England. For return by air, include \$1 for postage.)

Such unions as the UAW, the Teamsters, and the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers have approached the question of industrial democracy by fighting around health and safety conditions. An excellent introduction to this subject is provided by **Franklin Wallick**, a columnist for the UAW newspaper, in his new book **The American Worker: An Endangered Species** (Ballantine \$1.50 paper). Wallick exposes the lack of government and business concern over working conditions and proposes a Workers' Bill of Health Rights.

The **Medical Committee for Human Rights** has a group working on occupational health. (Write: MCHR Occupational Health Project, 2251 West Taylor, Chicago, Ill. 60612. Tel. (312) 243-4137.) **Urban Planning Aid**, in Cambridge, Mass., publishes a monthly bulletin on occupational health and safety available for \$2 a year; they also have compiled three pamphlets: **A Unionists' Guide to the Occupational Safety and Health Act of 1970**, **How to Look at Your Plant**, and **Noise and Your Job**, available for 25 cents each. (Write Urban Planning Aid, 639 Massachusetts Ave., Cambridge, Mass 02139. Tel. (617) 661-9220.)

The victory of the Miners for Democracy in the recent UMW election may signal a resurgence of militant, democratic working-class political activity. Two recent autobiographies by labor organizers provide insight into the problems of today's unions and give exciting accounts of the great organizing drives of the '30s. **Organize!**, by **Wyndham Mortimer** (Beacon Press \$3.95 paper) focuses on

the history of the UAW, and **Labor Radical**, by **Len De Caux** (Beacon Press \$4.45 paper) tells about the development of the CIO from the vantage point of an insider. De Caux, who served as **John L. Lewis'** aide, was subsequently rebaited and expelled from his job during the anti-Communist witch hunts of the '50s.

I also highly recommend the new biography **Harry Bridges—The Rise and Fall of Radical Labor in the U.S.**, by **Charles P. Larrowe** (Lawrence Hill & Co., \$3.95 paperback). It is particularly enlightening in describing the harassment of militant trade unionists by government and big business.

The best collection of articles on contemporary American working-class life and politics is the special Winter 1972 issue of **Dissent** magazine—titled **World of the Blue Collar Worker** and edited by **Irving Howe**. Quadrangle Books has published the special issue as a hardcover book (\$8.95). In a less analytical vein, **Ralph Nader's Center for the Study of Responsive Law** has compiled in-depth portraits by **Kenneth Lasson** of nine blue-collar workers, under the title **The Workers** (Bantam \$1.95 paper). And a series of informative articles by two **Washington Post** reporters, **Haynes Johnson** and **Nick Kotz** on the current state of unions has been published as **The Unions** (Pocket Books \$1.25).

The **New England Free Press**, largest distributor of low-priced movement literature in the U.S., has available an extensive annotated bibliography, **Literature on the American Working Class**, for 15 cents a copy. The Free Press also publishes a wide variety of other pamphlets on the working class—the set of 40 costs \$9.00. Ask for a copy of their complete literature list. **Radical America** magazine also publishes a good deal of literature on the working class. They will send a free copy of their catalog on request. (Write Radical America, 5 Upland Rd., Cambridge, Mass. 02140.)

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*An upcoming column will concern research on power elites and political dynamics at the state and community level—how to do research as well as good examples of exposé and analysis. It would be helpful if people would send good, factual, hard-hitting articles on those subjects.*