Review: Anarchists Never Surrender by Victor Serge

Anarcho

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This book is a collection of new translations of articles by Victor Serge (1890–1947). Born of Russian anti-Tsarist exiles in Belgium, Serge is of note for his odyssey from anarchism to Bolshevism, then from Trotskyism to some kind of libertarian Marxism. He is regularly trotted out by Leninists when anarchist influence is on the rise or when Bolshevik tyranny needs to be justified, usually in regard to the crushing of the Kronstadt revolt of 1921. The lesson is clear – Serge came to recognise the limitations of anarchism so follow his lead.

Indeed, his autobiography – *Memoirs of a Revolutionary* (New York: New York Review Book, 2012) written in the 1940s – does paint an appealing figure who sought to combine the best of anarchism and Marxism, someone aware of the dangers within Bolshevism but also "realistic" enough to support it in the face of civil war. Unfortunately, as more of his writings become available the more the myth he created about himself in his *Memoirs* disappears. *Anarchists Never Surrender* is the latest of such works and is of note simply for allowing us to better understand his move from anarchism to Bolshevism.

Yet even here we are being too generous. After a short period with the Belgium Social-Democrats, Serge did become an anarchist – but not a social anarchist. Rather, he embraced French *individualist* anarchism (not to be confused with the better known American individualist anarchism). This perspective – it is perhaps too nebulous to be called a theory as it reflected its adherents peculiar passions – was a complete dead-end and fundamentally elitist.

Thus *Anarchists Never Surrender* is of use for it shows why Serge embraced Bolshevism – but not in a way which latter-day Leninists seeking converts would like. This is because the bulk of the book comprises of translations of Serge's articles for the individualist anarchist press, primarily *l'anarchie*, and they show a deeply elitist perspective. Moving from an elitist individualist anarchism to an elitist Bolshevism is not the leap some may think at first sight.

So following a short and flawed preface by Richard Greeman ("Meditation on a Maverick") and an introduction by the editor and translator Mitchell Abidor ("The Old Mole of Individual Freedom") which covers the issues reasonably well, we have over 40 new translations of Serge's writings from 1908 to 1938, the bulk of which date from before his conversion to Bolshevism in 1919. All help flesh out Serge's politics and show that there is a link between the phases,

namely "contempt for the masses" (3) and elitism, a belief in the key role and importance of the avant-garde, a vanguard of some kind.

It is in this sense, and in this sense alone, that Abidor is right to suggest that Serge "abandon[ed] anarchism while maintaining its essence." (11) He kept the essence of the elitism of his *individualist* anarchism and found a new home for it in the elitism of Bolshevism which flowed from Lenin's *What is to be Done?* and the perspectives which naturally flow from holding positions in the highest echelons of the State machine.

Thus we find the individualist Serge proclaiming that "*in all areas* impartial science demonstrates to us the inferiority of the working class" (40); "To think that impulsive, defective, ignorant crowds will have done with the morbid illogic of capitalist society is a vulgar illusion" (47); denouncing the "rules issued by majoritarian herds against the boldness of minorities" (56); that revolutions "only succeeded when bourgeois liberals and intriguers have joined the insurgent people." (120) All in all, nothing could be expected from the masses and so the individualists must live their lives to the full and take, by whatever means, what they needed to do so. The individualists considered themselves so revolutionary they rejected revolution itself: "And so, for us, changing an oppressive regime is a pure waste of time." (84)

The links with Lenin's vanguardism are clear enough: "*there could not have been* Social-Democratic consciousness among the workers" as it must "be brought to them from without. The history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively by its own effort, is able to develop only trade union consciousness" while the "theory of socialism, however, grew out of the philosophic, historical, and economic theories elaborated by educated representatives of the propertied classes, by intellectuals." This meant "there can be no talk of an independent ideology formulated by the working masses themselves in the process of their movement, the *only* choice is — either bourgeois or socialist ideology. There is no middle course" and so "to belittle the socialist ideology *in any way, to turn aside from it in the slightest degree* means to strengthen bourgeois ideology. There is much talk of spontaneity. But the *spontaneous* development of the working-class movement leads to its subordination to bourgeois ideology." (Lenin, *The Lenin Anthology* [New York: Princeton University, 1975], 24, 28–9)

Serge's politics and Lenin's shared the same foundations even if they came to very different practical conclusions. For Lenin, the masses had a role to play in hoisting the vanguard into State power by means of revolution while Serge did not come to this conclusion until 1919 – as seen, for example, by the articles translated in *Revolution in Danger: Writings from Russia, 1919–1921* (London: Redwords, 1997). This perspective can be seen from the few post-1918 articles included in this collection and they reflect the same contempt for the masses Serge expressed between 1908 and 1918.

Still, regardless of this, we can be sure that Serge will continue to weave a spell over certain Marxists for some reason. Take Richard Greeman's preface, which is staggering in its claims. Serge, he asserts, "lived and died an internationalist, an individualist, and an enemy of the state" who also "collaborated with the Bolsheviks" and "never surrendered his identity as an anarchist" and yet underwent an "evolution from anarchism to Marxism." (x, xi)

How can that be? An enemy of the state who happily collaborated with the Bolshevik state? An individualist who ended up denouncing individualism as a fatal flaw of anarchism? An anarchist who *rejected* anarchism to become a Leninist? He could, I suppose, invoke the magical word "dialectics" but that could not help for these contradictions only exist in Greeman's mind: Serge became a Marxist and so combined a rhetorical anti-statism for the dim and distant future

with supporting a massive expansion of the state in the here and now. But, then, Greeman thinks that former Socialist Party of America member Big Bill Haywood was an anarchist. (vii)

While Serge may have retained enough of his anarchism to have concerns over the reality of the Bolshevik regime (in private), this did not impact on his role as its public defender and his attempts to win over anarchists to Bolshevism. This has never been very convincing, as numerous anarchists at the time and subsequently have argued. So it is nonsense to suggest Serge joined the Bolsheviks "all the while vowing to struggle against as he could against their dictatorial tendencies" (xiv) at the same time as he "continued publicly to write pamphlets for Reds" (xiv) – in which he defended the necessity of party dictatorship! It is hardly "sectarian" (xv) to note the obvious contradiction.

Serge's more reflective writings of the mid-1930s onwards *are* of interest, mostly because he starts to grope towards the communist-anarchism he had rejected during his individualist phase. However, he cannot quite bring himself to reject Leninism as a dead-end and so seeks to champion the rhetoric of 1917 while not bringing himself to recognise how quickly the reality of the Bolshevik regime made a mockery of it.

So we have Serge proclaiming that the regime was "already on the slippery slope to an authoritarian state" (224) when it betrayed the Makhnovists in late 1920. Yet can a party dictatorship – in place since mid-1918 – be anything other than authoritarian? Indeed, the articles he wrote eulogising Bolshevism in the anarchist press defended the party dictatorship as inevitable, the authoritarian state as a necessity for a successful revolution. Indeed, one such article is included here, namely his introduction Bakunin's *Confession* written in 1919 which argued that "Bakunin already predicted Bolshevism" in his advocacy of "a powerful dictatorial power" (Bakunin's words) and "Lenin couldn't describe the proletarian dictatorship any better." (163) That this was from Bakunin's pre-anarchist period goes unmentioned, but it shows how willing Serge was to embrace and broadcast widely the party orthodoxy.

So by 1920 the regime *was* an authoritarian state and had been since mid-1918, at the latest. Serge pretends to be unaware of this and suggests "it was mainly due to the spirit of intolerance that increasingly gripped the Bolshevik Party from 1919; to the monopoly of power, the ideological monopoly, the dictatorship of the leaders of the party, already tending to substitute themselves for that of the soviets and even the party." (226) Yet reading *Year One of the Russian Revolution* (London/New York: Bookmarks, Pluto Press and Writers and Readers, 1992) and its defence of these various monopolies and dictatorships shows this was not the case.

In this work, we find in 1921 Serge arguing that "all power—the power to do everything—means a dictatorship; an organized revolutionary vanguard (even as a union) is the same as a party." (181) By 1938, he seems aware of the dangers of this approach (perhaps because he had experienced the sharp-end of it himself for his activities in the Left-Opposition?). Still, in 1921 he did recognise reality somewhat, even if it appears to be a sop for his anarchist audience to better ease their conversion to Bolshevism:

"The greatest danger of dictatorship is that it tends to firmly implant itself, that it creates permanent institutions that it wants neither to abdicate nor to die a natural death. In all of history there is no example of a dictatorship that died on its own." (182)

So why, then, join it? Advocate its necessity? Work to strengthen it? Serge's notion (viii, xiv) that a few anarchists joining the Communist Party – and being subject to its discipline! – would counteract such institutional pressures proved to be as utopian as expected. Particularly given that Serge's argument is that anarchist ideas had been proven by the experience of the Russian

Revolution to be wrong and that centralisation, dictatorship and so on were necessities which every revolution would need to embrace.

So there are contradictions in Serge's politics, just as there are in Leninism as a whole. Not least the contradiction between reality and rhetoric which produces the doublethink we are familiar with in Leninist circles. Serge's doublethink was farcical at times. So, for example, after proclaiming that the Bolsheviks were right to shoot some of the anarchists during the Russian Revolution, he proclaimed:

"We take a solemn vow to fight for the establishing of a true workers' democracy, for true freedom of thought and organization in the ranks of the revolution, joined to a true discipline in combat and production. We remember that the dictatorship of the proletariat is a dictatorship against the bourgeoisie and freedom for the workers." (195)

Not that the Bolshevik regime was like this, of course. It does not help that this letter is immediately followed in the book by an article written two years later which proclaims that "[o]nce Kronstadt rebelled, it had to be subdued, no doubt." (197) That Kronstadt had rebelled for soviet democracy, for freedom for the workers, for freedom of thought and organisation of workers' parties, makes Serge's "solemn vow" hard to take seriously.

Still, reading his comments on Kronstadt pondering when the party began "to employ toward the toiling masses [...] nonsocialist methods which must be condemned because they ended by assuring the victory of the bureaucracy over the proletariat" (198) we cannot help wondering if he regretted his role in justifying these methods earlier? It is hard to tell for every comment that he did is matched by at least one justifying the actions of the Bolshevik regime.

This can be seen from the article "Anarchist Thought," from 1938 and the final text included. That he was a former anarchist may make some take this article more seriously than your typical Marxist account, but they would be wrong. So we get the usual Marxist assertion that anarchism is imbued with "the spirit of small-scale production that preceded modern large-scale industry" (226) amongst the parroting of the usual nonsense about the likes of Proudhon and Bakunin. Ironically, after misrepresenting the latter by ignoring his syndicalism he admits that Marxism "in reality became part of a regime they claimed to combat. Socialism became bourgeois." (208) He fails to note that Bakunin correctly predicted this. Likewise, he draws the usual and false Leninist distinction between anarchism and syndicalism, forgetting that most of the "celebrated militants" to whom he contrasts the "men of action" who "have gone over to syndicalism" advocated syndicalism as a tactic, not least Rudolf Rocker and Emma Goldman. (212)

Strangely, he ends by proclaiming the need for a "synthesis" between anarchism and Marxism (228) – yet why, if what Serge recounts of anarchism is remotely true? However, it is not. This can be seen when Serge presents a few sentences from Malatesta's *Anarchy* to illustrate what he considers anarchism "naïve intelligence, moral energy, faith, and, it must be said, blindness." Malatesta urges the destruction of government and expropriation of social wealth" and Serge adds that "there is no context" and "not a word or explanation" on "how this is to be accomplished," something which is typical of the regular "affirmations" in anarchist publications. (210–1)

The casual reader would probably not know that Malatesta's words (*Anarchy* [London: Freedom Press, 1995], 54) are from the conclusion of his pamphlet, a summing up of an argument he had already presented in some detail. Yet this conclusion indicated how social wealth would be expropriated – by the workers who toil in it and organise industry based on their needs and experience. (*Anarchy*, 52–3; 33) How else could it be done? And Malatesta also easily refutes those

who seek precise details of social transformation, noting that you cannot describe or prescribe how a free people will organise – not least because it would be authoritarian. (*Anarchy*, 45–6) All you can do is indicate a method, the principles and basis to build upon – such as abolition of State and Capital.

It must be noted that in 1917 Russian workers started to do as anarchists had long argued in the factory committee movement – until the Bolsheviks, driven by the very clear instructions of the *Communist Manifesto* "to centralise all instruments of production in the hands of the State" fatally undermined it (see Maurice Brinton's "The Bolsheviks and Workers' Control," *For Workers' Power* [Edinburgh/Oakland: AK Press, 2004] for details). The Bolshevik alternative not only added to the economic crisis the revolution faced, it also handed over economic power to the expanding bureaucracy. Serge, understandably, is silent about Malatesta's predictions on the failures of state socialism made long before Bolshevism existed which noted it "entrusts to a few the management of social life and leads to the exploitation and oppression of the masses by the few." (*Anarchy*, 47)

In addition, it is not clear what, if anything, anarchism would gain from a "synthesis" with Marxism – the need for class struggle, participation in the labour movement and so on can all be found in Bakunin while much of Marx's economic analysis was first raised by Proudhon. This is not to suggest Marx could not be gainfully read by anarchists, just that this does not equate to a "synthesis" – as a good understanding of anarchist theory would show.

Still, Serge was right – as he was right to bemoan the disorganisation of so much of the movement – to suggest that anarchism does base itself on the "spontaneity of the masses" (221) to some degree, but he was wrong to ignore the role played by minorities in anarchist theory to encourage the needed self-activity and self-organisation today. That this can often be better and more consistently organised is, of course, true but Serge dismissed (mocked!) all this during his individualist days and in his criticism of anarchism in 1938 is implicitly infused with the same elitist perspective, although he cannot quite say it openly.

He comes close in a passage in which he suggests that while the Russian masses knew what "what they didn't want," they lacked "sufficient revolutionary consciousness and capacity" and that only a tiny minority amongst them did. So "[w]ithout the Bolshevik organization it is extremely likely that the feeble revolutionary spontaneity of the masses would have been promptly repressed by another social minority, that of the counterrevolution led by the generals. The dictatorship of the proletariat saved Russia from a military dictatorship." (221) It is hard not to conclude that he obviously meant dictatorship by the Bolshevik Party, yet a few pages earlier he had waxed lyrical on Lenin's 1917 rhetoric:

"We know Lenin's solution: demolish the old state machine from top to bottom and immediately construct on the rubble a power—a state—radically different and new, one like there's never been, one that the Paris Commune of 1871 seemed to prefigure. A Commune-state with no caste of functionaries, without a police and army distinct from the nation, where the workers would exercise direct power through their local, federated councils. A state consequently decentralized and at the same time equipped with an active central mechanism. A democratic and libertarian state working to prepare its own absorption into the collectivity of labor, but exercising against the expropriated classes a veritable dictatorship in the interests of the proletariat." (219)

Ignoring that "Lenin's solution" simply repeated – but fatally injected with, and undermined by, Marxist confusions, jargon and prejudices – most of the conclusions reached by Bakunin and Kropotkin, I must stress that *this did not last a year*. As I discuss elsewhere (my chapter

in *Bloodstained: One Hundred Years of Leninist Counterrevolution* [AK Press, 2017] and section H.6 of *An Anarchist FAQ*), by the end of July 1918 the caste of functionaries (bureaucrats) had expanded and was continuing to expand at huge rate, there was a police force and army distinct from the people, the councils were marginalised, gerrymandered and packed by the Bolsheviks, "dictatorial" one-man management was being introduced in the workplace – all ruled over by a party holding a monopoly of power.

Apart from the final step of party dictatorship, this all predates the start of the civil war which is usually invoked by Leninists to rationalise – excuse! – Bolshevik authoritarianism. It was a striking confirmation of Bakunin's critique of Marxism, of which Serge strangely did not find time to mention. Yet the fact that Bakunin had predicted Marxism would produce "a veritable dictatorship" but one *over* the proletariat is significant – particularly given that his alternative, as applied by the Makhnovists, proved better.

Sadly, when Serge arrived in Russian in 1919 he took a job trying to sell this state-capitalist dictatorship to the world's anarchists. Given his earlier elitism, it is now easy to see why. For pre-1918 Serge, the masses were backward, nothing could be expected from them, they were a hindrance to freedom of the enlightened few who had to ignore the masses — other than educate them – to live their lives. For the post-1918 Serge, all this remained true but now he saw that the enlightened few could isolate themselves from the masses with state power and use that to educate them and make them fit, eventually, for freedom.

Now, perhaps Serge is right, perhaps the masses are incapable and anarchist hopes are dreams. If so, then it would appear that Bolshevism did not fail the masses, rather the masses failed Bolshevism. That *is* possible but then "Lenin's solution" is equally invalid and we are left with the dictatorship of the party and, inevitability, the dictatorship of the leaders within the party. If this is the case then, please, be honest about it and reject the flowing rhetoric of 1917 and advocate the grim reality of 1918. Given both its unappealing nature and its inevitable end in the rule of the bureaucracy, it is unsurprising that Serge – like most Leninists – cannot bring himself to do this, so we left with the contradictions expressed in his writings from the 1930s as shown in the handful included here.

However, such a bleak conclusion need not be drawn. I must note that "Anarchist Thought" contains an accurate account of the Makhnovist movement in the Ukraine which refutes his own arguments against anarchism in the same article. This is important for the Makhnovists show the impact of ideology and structures on the fate of the Russian Revolution. Both they and the Bolsheviks were operating in similar circumstances but with radically different results. Unsurprisingly, Leninists tend to disparage the Makhnovists and we discover that earlier Serge suggested that "the Ukrainian anarchists have themselves avoided none of the errors for which they reproach the Bolsheviks." (169) Yet the Makhnovists supported soviet democracy and defended freedom of speech and association. For all the divergences from ideals you would expect from any real movement in a life-and-death struggle against both White and Red tyranny, the record of the Makhnovists is far better than the Bolsheviks – as can be seen not only in the practice of encouraging the freedoms the Bolsheviks crushed but also in their theory, for they never suggested the necessity for party dictatorship.

Serge wonders who was "responsible for the strangling of [this] profoundly revolutionary peasant movement" (225) yet the answer is clear given that Serge himself notes that the Makhnovists "considered the 'dictatorship of the commissars' a new form of autocracy and dreamed of unleashing a Third Revolution against it," (224) and his own writings from the period showed that

they were simply noting the reality of the situation: the Bolshevik regime *was* the dictatorship of the commissars. Such a regime would not tolerate a libertarian alternative within its borders.

To conclude, Abidor's notion of Serge having "the old mole of individual freedom" (1) burrowing through his writings is true in a sense – as you usually cannot see the mole, likewise you usually cannot see Serge's supposed libertarian positions. This can be seen from the notion that Serge's "New Tendencies in Russian Anarchism" was some kind of "dissident" work, (13) a farcical position as it clearly fits into the Comintern's aim to convert anarchists to Bolshevism. How better than an account of how Russian anarchists were drawing Bolshevik conclusions: "These anarchists have ended up as communist"? (187)

Greeman may be right that to his "knowledge Serge never fabricates" (ix) but Serge was more than happy to repeat Bolshevik slanders on Kronstadt (*The Serge-Trotsky Papers* [London: Pluto Press, 1994], 18) and in this book it is shown that in 1920 he repeated Bolshevik lies that the Makhnovists "speculated on the spirit of small land-ownership of the peasants, on their nationalism, even on anti-Semitism, all of which had dreadful consequences." (169) He admits the truth much latter in another article (223) – but forgets to mention that he was once one of those accusers he was now refuting.

To suggest that deep down Serge remained an anarchist is ridiculous – his Bolshevism was sincere and his defence of party dictatorship, State terror, and so on were not compatible with any form of libertarian theory. He does deserve credit for opposing Stalinism at a time when that was an extremely dangerous thing to do (particularly in Russia), but it does not make his Trotskyism any real alternative. Strangely, Greeman states that Serge "collaborated with the Bolsheviks from 1919 to 1927" (x) but while his collaboration with the Russian state may have ended then, he considered himself a *real* Bolshevik (unlike the Stalinists) and worked with the Left Opposition and then the Trotskyists in exile. That from the mid-1930s he appears to have re-evaluated this position and perhaps finally seen its flaws does not change this fact – nor that others, like Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman, came to the correct conclusion he was struggling for… in 1920, if not before.

Still, it is useful to have these texts available for they help undermine the myth Serge created via his *Memoirs*. As noted, the more works by Serge become available the more unappealing he becomes. Indeed, this may explain pioneering Serge translator Peter Sedgwick's increasingly critical perspective on Serge which Greeman recounts. (xii) All in all, these and other texts show that Greeman's claim that Serge kept "his moral and political compass pointing more or less in the right direction" (xiii) is false – unless supporting party dictatorship, crushing revolts for workers' democracy and such like are now considered moral. One thing is sure, they are not revolutionary – as Emma Goldman put it, true anarchists never side with the master class even if it is draped in a red flag.

Perhaps anarchists never surrender, but they can stop being anarchists – that Serge swapped individualist anarchism elitism for Bolshevik elitism does not make him someone to aspire to. Indeed, these texts show the uselessness of his earlier politics and how its ultra-radical-sounding rhetoric masked a deeply non-revolutionary perspective. Instead of Serge, we should look to the works of such communist-anarchists as Goldman, Berkman, Rocker and the many others who saw through the Bolshevik Myth decades before Serge started to.

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