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Victor Serge's Anarchist Opposition to Belgian Colonialism in Congo

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Congo

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the Congolese population was halved. At least 10 million Congolese had their lives taken.

And Congo has been preyed upon brutally since independence in 1960, with neo-colonial states and corporations funding and supporting successive wars—largely waged by proxy armies in the interests of securing Congo's vast mineral wealth. This includes mining of coltan, the essential mineral in the current “mobile” tech age.

War erupted in 1996 as a direct outcome of the 1994 Rwandan genocide. A second war began in 1998. Involving the armed forces of at least seven countries and multiple militias fighting proxy wars for imperialist interests. The International Rescue Committee reports that from 1998–2007 approximately 5.4 million people were killed as a result of these conflicts in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Other reports suggest that since 1996, at least six million people have been killed with more than six million people internally displaced in eastern DRC alone.

More recent reports, from 2024, estimate that the crises in DR Congo have resulted in the internal displacement of 7.2 million people. This would be the second largest internal displacement crisis on the African continent. Since the beginning of 2024 alone, more than 738,000 people have been newly displaced in DR Congo, mostly due to armed conflicts.

References

Serge, Victor. “Apropos of Congo.” In *Anarchists Never Surrender: Essays, Polemics, and Correspondence on Anarchism 1908-1938*. Mitchell Abidor (Ed.). Oakland: PM Press, 21-22

The recent course of imperialism, and debates within anarchist movements over contemporary atrocities, reveal a certain lack of familiarity with anarchist positions on colonialism and imperialism. The positions of historic anarchists have been overlooked, forgotten, or largely lost to time.

Towards the end of revisiting and highlighting historic anarchist positions I want to reflect on some of that overlooked work. I begin with this short presentation of Victor Serge's opposition to the colonization of Congo by the Belgian state and its social democratic leadership of the day.

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Serge's 1908 article, “Apropos of the Congo,” was written during Serge's early period as an anarchist in Belgium. Serge would break from the social democrats of that time when the party under the leadership of Vandervelde pursued and rationalized the Belgian state's annexation of the Congo following the end of the brutal rule of the Congo Free State by King Leopold II.

Congo today, of course, remains a central site of murderous imperialist plunder. Millions of Congolese have been killed in successive imperialist bloodbaths, largely driven by capital's pursuit of the country's mineral wealth, including minerals that are essential to the modern tech, and war, economies.

“Apropos of the Congo”

The matter of the day was whether the Belgian state would re-colonize (annex) Congo following the end of the Congo Free State in which Belgian King Leopold II had colonized Congo as his own personal property. Victor Serge had already taken a leading part in denouncing the barbaric rule of King Leopold II in the Congo Free State. He did not want to see colonialism continued by another name, this time under the Belgian state.

Published on May Day in 1908 in the paper *Le Communiste*, “Apropos of the Congo” sees Serge get right to the heart of the matter, which he names openly and unflinchingly—colonization. In angry terms he writes:

“Even if we aren’t talking about the proceeding of doubtful honesty that consists in annexing a country and a people over whom we no right other than that of the stronger; even if aren’t talking about the mentality of inferior or so-called inferior peoples the way you and I do of herds of lambs we shear before we eat, thinking about what is called colonization, I see aspects of this that lead me to reflect...” (21).

His reflections draw out all of the enmeshed depravities of colonialism: “There are peaceful villages decimated by forced labor, our murderous industry suddenly imported and imposed, military expeditions devastating the countryside, spreading terror, hatred, hunger...” (21).

Serge lays out the debased violence that colonial adventures still inflict on Congo today:

“There is a country flooded with blood by soldiers whose animal instincts are unleashed, with villages set on flame, men executed en masse, women raped...What irony: other people’s fatherlands are set to torch and the sword by our patriots” (22).

Serge returns to the colonial violence of Belgian colonization in another piece written four years later, “The Real Criminals.” Serge identifies the real criminals as capitalists, those

who plunder workers and the planet for profit. Those who export their crimes through colonialism.

In a manner that prefigures, in sketch form, the analysis put forward by Frantz Fanon in significant detail, Serge raises the matter of the impacts of colonization on the colonizer. Serge queries:

“And to us?”

It will be our sons, our brothers, and our fathers setting off for there attracted by misleading appearances and returning to us—when they return—burned by fever, degraded, polluted” (22).

Serge does clarify, at the same time, that “I don’t feel sorry for those who will go there and die working at a task fit for murderers” (22).

Serge directs sweeping condemnation at the Belgian Social Democrats and their service to the Belgian bourgeoisie. He states: “Our bourgeoisie will grow fat on all this monetized blood and sweat. The money picked up over there in the mud, in the bloody shade of the forests, will serve to enslave us here and pay the executioners” (22). He recognizes that colonialism is also always class war, one waged with impacts on the proletariat at home and abroad.

Murderous Colonialism in Congo Continues

In the end, Belgium did colonize Congo from 1908 to 1960. Of course, Serge’s opposition was correct in all regards, the social democrat’s position a historic and lasting disgrace, condemning social democracy itself. A warning of the often overlooked basis of social democratic state governance on the backs of colonized people.

Belgian rule in Congo, from the Congo Free State through colonization, was, of course, among the greatest of human atrocities. It is estimated that between 1880 and 1920 alone,