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MEMOIRS OF A REVOLUTIONARY, by Victor Serge. Translated by Peter Sedgwick. (Oxford University Press, 42s.).

These memoirs trace the life of Victor Lvovich Kibalchich—alias Victor Serge—"revolutionary, novelist and poet", who began his political life as a young socialist in Belgium, became active in individualist anarchist circles in Paris, worked with the syndicalists in Barcelona, joined the Russian Communist Party just after the 1917 Revolution, was expelled for belonging to the Left Opposition, left Russia after a period of exile in Central Asia, and died a revisionist Marxist in Mexico in 1947. Serge writes well and the poet is present in many passages (particularly in his evocations of Paris), but the book left me with a sense of emptiness, a feeling of sadness that so much talent should have been wasted in useless politicking.

The chapter I found the most interesting—and the most disappointing—was the first, the bulk of which is devoted to Serge's anarchist activity before World War I. Repelled by the academic anarchism preached by Jean Grave, Serge

became prominent—under the name of Le Rétif—among the individualists inspired by Albert Libertad (1875–1908) and was a close friend of two of the so-called "Bonnot Gang" who, despairing of peaceful propaganda, waged their war against society by means of armed bank robberies. Serge gives only the sketchiest of descriptions of the ideas he held at this time and the merest hints of his activities. Reviewing the first French edition of the "Memoirs", E. Armand remarked that Serge was

> "… a memoir-writer with a short memory who forgets the rôle he played in regard to 'l'anarchie' (an individualist weekly—S.P.) with which he collaborated from September, 1909 to January, 1912. If he tells us in detail of the private life of Libertad … he guards himself from saying that he (Serge) was the man who searched for 'rare sensations', the man of the unbounded 'I deny', the glorifier of the 'Bandits' on the morrow of the rue Ordener affair ('l'anarchie', January 3, 1912), the exalter of 'the unsubmissive, deserters, thieves, because they are not adapted to slavery … for us (he wrote) they are the only men who dare to revindicate life.' Kibalchich has forgotten the endless Stirnerian, Nietzschean and Ibsenian litanies that he gladly reeled off. As he forgets rather indelicately that Rirette Maîtrejean was his companion and that he did not stop writing to her for a long time … " (This last omission is made good by a note by the translator in the English edition—S.P.)

In addition, Serge makes the almost traditional misrepresentation of Stirner and attempts, in usual Marxist style, to link conscious egoism with "the most brutal bourgeois individual-

ism." He also tries to give yet another death sentence to anarchism : "Between the copious theorizing of Peter Kropotkin and Elisée Réclus, and the rage of Albert Libertad, the collapse of anarchism in the bourgeois jungle was now obvious." Unfortunately this rather contradicts what he had written earlier about Libertad being "the heart and soul of a movement of such exceptional dynamism that it is not entirely dead even at this day (*i.e.* 30 years later.—S.P.)". A case of "he's dead, but he won't lie down"?

The remainder of the book retells the now well-known and wearying tale of the fate of enthusiastic idealists who supported the Bolshevik seizure of power in 1917. Once more the tragic farce of the biters being bit is unfolded and the ghosts of persecutors who fell victims to the machine they helped to create are paraded before us. Serge sees these men as the iron cohort of the Revolution. Actually they appear to be more possessed men who drove themselves and others to pointless destruction. He quotes "certain French individualists" who said to him: "Revolutions are useless. They will not change human nature. Afterwards reaction sets in and everything starts all over again. I've only got my own skin; I'm not marching for wars or for revolutions, thank you." These words he dismisses as "cynical stock phrases", but in view of the evidence he himself provides one is led to the conclusion that "certain French individualists" were not all that wrong.

In spite of his earlier individualist associations and his youthful enthusiasm for Stirner, Nietzsche and Ibsen, Serge seems always to have wanted to serve something greater than himself. He claims that even in his individualist days "other influences were at work on me and there were other values which I neither could nor would abandon: basically, the revolutionary idealism of the Russians." Outlining his conception of the purpose of writing, he states that "Individual existences were of no interest to me—particularly my own—except by virtue of the great ensemble whose particles … are all that

we ever are." Even when, in his final summing-up, he says that "I view human personality as a supreme value", it is so "only integrated in society and history." And while disclaiming "any yearning for self-effacement" he nonetheless concludes "nothing of us is truly our own unless it be our sincere desire to share in the common life of mankind."

From all of this his abandonment of anarchism for Bolshevism becomes understandable. Russian "revolutionary idealism", like other idealism, was founded on the idea that the individual should give "all for the Cause." If "individual existences" are only of interest insofar as they are particles of the "great ensemble of life", and the "supreme value" of human personality is dependent on being "integral in society and history" and desirous of sharing "the common life of mankind", then individual uniqueness is at a discount and the forces that really matter are abstractions like "society", "history", and "mankind". Enraptured by these spooks Serge left the clear-eyed shown by Libertad and other "cynics" and stuck his head into the Marxist-Leninist noose. He paid the price with his suffering, his despair at the betrayal of his hopes, his agony at the deaths of his friends. So did thousands of others. The pity of it is that the lesson taught by his life will only be learned by those who have tasted at least a few of the bitter ashes which are all that remains of a once searing fire.

SID PARKER.