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Might-have-beens: George Orwell and Victor Serge

In 1944, Orwell listed Victor Serge (1890-1947) among the 'outstanding figures' of the European 'school' of 'political writing': one of those who try 'to write ... unofficial history, the kind that is ignored in the textbooks and lied about in the newspapers' – the history of 'totalitarianism' (CWGO XVI: 392; see also XVIII: 61). The books of writers such as Serge had, according to Orwell, both 'aesthetic' and 'historical' value, and nothing written in English came anywhere near them. By this stage in his life, Orwell was intimately familiar with the world of Continental anti-Stalinist socialism that Serge represented and chronicled, and with the persecutions to which it was subjected on all sides. Nineteen Eighty-Four could, quite simply, not have been written without the knowledge Orwell had gained from reading the newspapers, pamphlets and books produced by what Serge called the 'invisible international'. But though both Orwell and, to a much greater extent, Serge were key nodes in that international network, and are now frequently mentioned in the same breath, no one has ever systematically examined the connections between them. This brief piece by Anna Vaninskaya is the first step on that road.

One reason for the scholarly neglect of the relationship between the two authors may be simply that Orwell had little first-hand acquaintance with Serge's work. In fact, there is no hard evidence that he had read anything apart from some excerpts from Serge's manuscript memoirs, which appeared in Dwight Macdonald's journal *politics*. Serge published numerous articles in *politics* from 1944-47 and in *Partisan Review* from 1938-47, and was almost certainly a regular reader of Orwell in both periodicals, especially his 'London Letters'. But there is no knowing whether Orwell returned the favour. He did receive the posthumous French edition of Serge's greatest novel, *The Case of Comrade Tulayev*, in 1949, but whether he ever read it or answered his friend Catherine Karot's question: 'What did you think of L'affaire Toulaéff? ... I think it should be translated into English. Don't you?', is unclear (KAROT).

This would be little enough to go on, were it not for the fact that the two men had been orbiting each other since the early thirties, their paths nearly crossing again and again. The preface to the French edition of Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London* was written by Panait Istrati, Serge's Romanian friend and literary collaborator in the campaign to

expose Soviet conditions. A few years later, in 1937, the Independent Labour Party included Serge's book *From Lenin to Stalin* together with Orwell's as yet unnamed *Homage to Catalonia* (titled 'Barcelona Tragedy' at this stage) in a list of works articulating the ILP's party line, and lobbied Warburg to encourage their publication. Serge's book duly appeared from Secker and Warburg the same year, translated from the French by Ralph Manheim. Among Orwell's press cuttings of 1937 and 1938, one finds columns from the French newspaper *La Flèche* (where Serge regularly published in these years) citing Serge's name in relation to the campaign for the defence of the POUM and Kurt Landau, the Austrian socialist murdered by Stalin's agents in Spain (see the cutting dated 21.10.38). Indeed, Serge and Orwell had many POUM acquaintances in common, and Orwell's 'War-time Diary' from 22 March, 1942 mentions that 'The Communists in Mexico are again chasing Victor Serge and other Trotskyist refugees who got there from France, urging their expulsion ... Just the same tactics as in Spain' (*CWGO* XIII: 240). He may have read about this in *The New York Times* of February 1942, or heard about it from Dwight Macdonald, who received detailed accounts directly from Serge in Mexico in early 1942.

It is clear then, that in the late 1930s and early 40s Orwell knew of Serge chiefly through his American connections and Spanish interests, and that his documentary work was already being bracketed politically with Serge's. In 1946, Orwell used the de facto press embargo on Serge as a case-in-point to attack the 'Communist-controlled' periodical *Modern Quarterly* in a *Polemic* editorial: 'Would the *Modern Quarterly*, for instance, print a full history of the arrest and execution of Ehrlich and Alter, the Polish Socialist leaders? Would it reprint any extract from the Communist Party's "stop the war" pamphlets of 1940? Would it publish articles by Anton Ciliga or Victor Serge? It would not' (*CWGO* XVIII: 263, 267). The parallels with his own recent publication difficulties could not have been far from his mind. It therefore comes as no surprise that from 1945 to 1946 Orwell tried to persuade Fred

Warburg to publish Serge's memoirs in full, and for over a year acted as an intermediary between his publisher and the man he called 'the French Trotskyist' (*CWGO XVIII*: 61), although Serge was neither French (he was a Russian born in Belgium) nor a Trotskyist (he parted ways politically with Trotskyism long before).

At first the connection was maintained via Dwight Macdonald. As Orwell reported to Macdonald in a letter of 4 April, 1945: 'I had already had a talk with Roger Senhouse and ... Warburg about Victor Serge's memoirs and told them it was the kind of book they should get hold of'. Despite the difficulties posed by Serge's public reputation as a 'Trotskyist', Orwell also proposed to speak to Herbert Read at Routledge about the manuscript, as well as T. S. Eliot at Faber (who had just turned down *Animal Farm*). In a postscript, Orwell added that Senhouse was interested, possibly because 'S. & W. published one of Serge's books before' (*CWGO XVII*: 120). But then came a hitch. On 13 June Orwell wrote to Warburg: 'Victor Serge now doesn't want to send his memoirs across the Atlantic because it seems he has only one copy and he is frightened of their getting lost or seized on the way. I have written suggesting that he should get another copy typed' (*CWGO XVII*: 177). Orwell had no way of knowing that Serge was too poor to afford extra typewriter ribbons, and that he was extremely concerned about the Soviets' infiltration of the postal service and interception of letters. In 1942, Serge had already asked the Macdonalds to send their letters to him only by certified mail, and recounted suspicious goings on with his post.¹ He was not being paranoid: intercepted mail and seized manuscripts played an outsized role in Serge's life – he survived in Soviet internal exile chiefly on insurance payments for the former, and lost two completed novels to the NKVD when leaving the Soviet Union in 1936.

¹ What Serge may not have realised is that the FBI was also intercepting his correspondence, as Susan Weissman, John Rodden and John Rossi have all revealed. Copies of Serge's letters to Macdonald ended up in the latter's FBI dossier.

Time passed. On 14 February, 1946, Orwell wrote to Macdonald asking again ‘about that book of memoirs of Victor Serge’s? Couldn’t he get a copy to us somehow? Warburg declared himself interested some time back’ (*CWGO* XVIII: 107). Then, on 4 March, 1946, Serge finally wrote to Orwell directly in slightly awkward English (errors preserved):

Dear Mr. George Orwell,

I beg your indulgence for my english-writing. I dont know if you read french. I am informed by our common friend, Dwight Macdonald, thant Messrs Seecker and Warburg are interested in my book of souvenirs, one chapter of which (and another fragment) appeared in Politics, and that you wrote about this, expresing the wish to have the manuscript. -- It is the book of a witness and militant, strictly objective and objectively impassionate. For many reasons, it could not be published in this hemisphere till now... But I am convinced it will have an opportunity. I am disposed to send to you or Messrs Seecker and Warburg a manuscript (in french), in the hope to find in England my first readers for this time. [...] And, if the book is not published in England, I wish to have the assurance that the manuscript will be returned to me or to my agents in a not too long time. Would you be so kind to establish for me the contact with Messrs Seecker and Warburg and to give them my adress?

I am one of your faithful readers in Part. Rev. and I have heard of your success with a wonderful novel about a zoological revolution... Your letters to PR were true models of the honest and thoughtful information. I was particularly happy to read the letter containing your “confession of errors”, so full of humor and sane philosophy. If the militants of leftist movements had a little of this spirit, the rev. leftism of to day would not be in this painful state of sclerosis.

Another question. Do you know in England a publication wich could be interested in Letters from Mexico about Latin-American living, thinking and politics? (I write only in french.)

Sincerely yours,

Victor Serge

PS. The publishers can be interested to know that a novel of mine, entitled Les Derniers Temps and concerning the fall of France, will appear this year in french and in american. -- VS.

[handwritten postscript] All important letters to me must be registered, considering the activities [?] of certain totalitarian cells. – VS

Orwell faithfully relayed the contents to Warburg on 11 March, referring him to ‘translated fragments [of the memoir] in “Politics”’ and giving Serge’s correspondence address (in which Serge used his mother’s surname (Paderewski) rather than his own (Kibalchich) or his pseudonym, possibly for concealment purposes). Orwell also added that Serge’s insistence ‘that letters to him should be registered’ was ‘a not unreasonable precaution’ (*CWGO XVIII*: 148), and on 16 March supplied Serge’s address to Arthur Koestler, recommending him as a ‘sympathiser’ (*CWGO XVIII*: 155).

On 21 March, Serge wrote to Orwell again, this time in French (my translation – AV):

My dear George Orwell,

I have just received your letter of 14 March and a copy of that of Messrs Secker and Warburg. I hope you are feeling better!

In a few days I will send you the manuscript of my memoirs, by regular post, airmail being above my means...

It is a big book which I believe is extremely interesting, or in any case, unique of its kind. I propose to add a penultimate chapter about Mexico, the death of Trotsky, and the Comintern in Latin America. I will write this chapter when I know of the publishers’ firm decision. It will also be necessary to write a very brief circumstantial introduction-foreword at the last moment, before publication, which I will gladly do, unless you yourself would agree to provide a preface presenting me to the English reader? That would make me very happy.

[...]

My novel about the defeat of Europe, Les Derniers Temps, is being published in Canada and New York. But I have something else in my desk drawer, a major novel that takes place in Moscow in 38, at the time of the show trials, and whose hour will come. We can speak of it in a little while.

Cordially and fraternally yours,

Victor Serge

On 8 April, Orwell informed his French translator and friend Yvonne Davet (in French) that Serge was about to send him the manuscript of his memoirs, and expressed his hope that Warburg would publish it (*CWGO XVIII*: 227). There is no record of any other letters from

Serge in the Orwell Archive, but on 17 April Orwell wrote to Roger Senhouse that he had ‘just heard from Victor Serge again who says he has despatched his memoirs (to me, apparently) by ordinary registered mail. I trust they’ll reach me before I leave for Scotland ... As soon as they come I’ll read them and then shove them on to you with my ideas’ (*CWGO XVIII*: 245).

Unfortunately, Orwell received Serge’s manuscript just as he was leaving for Jura, and on 4 May he wrote to Warburg: ‘I am sending ... Trotsky’s Life of Stalin and Victor Serge’s memoirs, which I received yesterday. I have only looked at the latter to the extent of seeing that it is an untidy manuscript, but if it is up to the extracts which were printed in “Politics” it should be a worth-while book’ (*CWGO XVIII*: 304). Warburg ended up rejecting it, but over two months later Orwell was still not aware of this. On 20 July he wrote to Macdonald from Jura mentioning that he is ‘contemplating starting another book’ – the future *Nineteen Eighty-Four* – and reporting that he had ‘passed on the MS of Victor Serge’s memoirs to Warburg just before I came away, but I don’t know what W. has done about them, and as they only arrived just before I left London I didn’t get time to read them’ (*CWGO XVIII*: 357).

The memoirs would not see the light of day until after Serge’s and Orwell’s deaths (1951). That near-miss must count as one of the most unfortunate in the history of socialist literature. What might have been if Orwell *had* managed to read the book that would subsequently be acknowledged as one of the major anti-totalitarian documents of the era? Would he have pressed Warburg a bit more vehemently to publish it? How would its portrait of a life of resistance inside the totalitarian system have influenced the composition of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*? And most tantalisingly of all, would it have prompted Orwell to take Serge up on his offer in the second letter to tell him more about the ‘major novel’ languishing in Serge’s ‘desk drawer’? This was *The Case of Comrade Tulayev*, written on the run in

France, the Caribbean and Mexico from 1940 to 1942, but not published until 1948, the year after Serge's death (Davison's brief summary of Serge's letters in *CWGO* XVIII: 149 misinterprets the reference to *Tulayev*). If Orwell had had the chance to read this powerful realist precursor to his dystopia in 1946, instead of a mere five months before his own death, the course of literary history may well have been changed.

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ORWELL/H/2/74/1 and ORWELL/H/2/74/2.

KAROT – Catherine Karot to George Orwell, 25 August, 1949, UCL Library Special Collections, ORWELL/H/1/104.

CWGO – Davison, Peter, ed. *The Complete Works of George Orwell*. 20 vols. Secker and Warburg, 1997-98.