



VICTOR SERGE
**BIRTH OF
OUR POWER**

TRANSLATED WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
RICHARD GREEMAN

*"Birth of Our Power is one of the finest romances of revolution ever written,
and confirms Serge as an outstanding chronicler of his turbulent era."*

—New York Times

Praise for *Birth of Our Power*

“Nothing in it has dated. . . . It is less an autobiography than a sustained, incandescent lyric (half-pantheist, half-surrealist) of rebellion and battle.”

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“*Birth of Our Power* is one of the finest romances of revolution ever written, and confirms Serge as an outstanding chronicler of his turbulent era. . . . As an epic, *Birth of Our Power* has lost none of its strength.”

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Victor Serge

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Birth of Our Power

Birth of Our Power

Victor Serge. Translated by Richard Greeman

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Introduction

by Richard Greeman

Birth of Our Power is an epic novel set in Spain, France, and Russia during the heady revolutionary years 1917–1919. It was composed a decade later in Leningrad by a remarkable witness-participant, the Franco-Russian writer and revolutionary Victor Serge (1890–1947).¹ Serge’s tale begins in the spring of 1917, in the third year of insane mass slaughter in the blood- and rain-soaked trenches of World War I, when the flames of revolution suddenly erupt in Russia and Spain. Europe is “burning at both ends.” In February, the Russian people overthrow the Czar, while in neutral Spain militant anarcho-syndicalist workers allied with middle-class Catalan nationalists rise up in mass strikes aimed at taking power. Although the Spanish uprising eventually fizzles, in Russia the workers, peasants, and common soldiers are able to take power and hold it. *Birth of Our Power* chronicles that double movement.

Serge’s novel follows an anonymous narrator’s odyssey from Barcelona to Petrograd,² from one red city to the other, from the romanticism of radicalized workers awakening to their own power in a sun-drenched Spanish metropolis to the grim reality of workers clinging to power in Russia’s dark, frozen revolutionary outpost. Where Dickens constructed his *Tale of Two Cities* around the opposition between conservative London (‘white’) and revolutionary Paris (‘red’) Serge’s novel is based on the opposition of two cities, both red: Barcelona, the city ‘we’ could not take, and Petrograd—the starving capital of the Russian Revolution, besieged by counterrevolutionary whites.

Like Homer’s Odysseus and Virgil’s Aeneas, Serge’s nameless narrator is fated to pass through the Underworld on his two-year odyssey from the defeated revolution to the victorious one. He spends over a

¹ Please see the postface in this volume, “Victor Serge, Writer and Revolutionary,” for an overview of his life and works.

² The once and future ‘St. Petersburg.’ In Soviet times, ‘Leningrad.’

year in French World War I concentration camps for subversives. The novel ends in Petrograd with something of an anti-climax: The city of victorious revolution, the city where ‘we’ have taken power, is revealed not as a vast tumultuous forum, but as a grim, half-empty metropolis, “not at all dead, but savagely turned in on itself, in the terrible cold, the silence, the hate, the will to live, the will to conquer.”

Whereas the defeat in Barcelona is partially transformed into a victory by the heroic exaltation of the masses newly awakened to a sense of their own power, in Petrograd, the original question of “Can we take power?” is superseded by an even more difficult one: “Can we survive and learn to use that power?” The novel thus plays on the ironic themes of ‘victory-in-defeat’ (Barcelona) and ‘defeat-in-victory’ (Petrograd).

Autobiography into Fiction

Serge lived it all. The novel follows its author’s own two-year itinerary across war-torn Europe from an aborted revolt in Spain to the promise of a victorious revolution in Russia, but strange to say, the novel is not really autobiographical. Serge’s anonymous narrator is little more than a ‘camera eye’ giving multiple perspectives on the action. He has no personal life. He never gets to speak a line, only to observe and narrate. Indeed, the pronoun ‘I’ appears only once or twice per chapter. The fraternal ‘we,’ the first-person plural, is Serge’s preferred part of speech, beginning with the very first sentence, indeed with the title.

I feel an aversion to using “I” as a vain affirmation of the self, containing a good dose of illusion and another of vanity or arrogance. Whenever possible, that is to say whenever I am not feeling isolated, when my experience highlights in some way or other that of people with whom I feel linked, I prefer to employ the pronoun “we,” which is truer and more general. We never live only by our own efforts, we never live only for ourselves; our most intimate, our most personal thinking is connected by a thousand links with that of the world.”³

Serge’s novel presents these events in a kaleidoscoping series of tableaux studded with ‘epiphanies’—realistic incidents that unveil transcendent social truths. Given *Birth of Our Power*’s somewhat disjointed, cinematographic style—no doubt influenced by such modernist

³ *Memoirs of a Revolutionary* (New York: NYRB Classics, 2012), 53.

masterpieces as Andrei Biely's *St. Petersburg*, Boris Pilnyak's *Naked Year*, and John Dos Passos's *USA*—readers are often at a loss as to how to contextualize the novel's rapid succession of impressionistic scenes in terms of real-world politics and history.

The opening pages of *Birth of Our Power* are steeped in symbolism and poetic beauty, but they may prove exasperating for the reader who does not share the author's intimacy with Spanish revolutionary history. Indeed, Serge never refers to Barcelona by name, only as 'this city.' And it is only through passing references to the War in Europe that we are able to place the events there historically.

For most readers, the phrase 'Spanish Revolution' brings to mind the 1936–39 Civil War. But in fact the Spanish revolutionary tradition, with all its passion and brutality, goes back much further, to Napoleonic times (think of Goya's *Disasters of War*). Throughout the nineteenth century, repeated attempts to establish liberal government in Spain resulted only in bloody fusillades and paper reforms. Spain entered the twentieth century, after its stunning defeat by the United States in 1898, as a backward, corrupt, priest-and-soldier-ridden monarchy. The anarchism of the Russian Bakunin caught the imagination of the peasants and of the workers in the new industrial centers like Barcelona, and their revolt took the form of *jacqueries* and individual terrorism—a situation similar to that in even more backward Czarist Russia.

The monarchy's response to social unrest was the establishment of a new Inquisition responsible for wholesale arrests and executions and for the brutal torture of anyone even remotely connected with the revolutionary movement. The judicial murder at Montjuich, the craggy mountain fortress that overlooks the city in Serge's opening pages, of Francisco Ferrer, the progressive educationalist, blamed for the 1909 general strike, raised a worldwide storm of protest, including street battles in Paris, in which nineteen-year-old Serge took part. In *Birth of Our Power*, the citadel of Montjuich, where many rebels had been tortured and shot, becomes the symbol both of the revolutionary past and the oppressive power of the present.

The immediate cause of the uprisings of the summer of 1917 in Barcelona was the increased confidence of both the bourgeoisie and the working class of Catalonia during the World War I industrial boom. Neutral Spain was making money hand over fist selling to both sides. The bourgeois nationalists of the Lliga Regionalista were in the forefront of the fight against the autocracy, and for them the fight was for

increased regional autonomy and a democracy. The Lliga fixed the date of July 19, 1917, for the calling of an assembly. The anarcho-syndicalists of the CNT (National Labor Confederation) criticized this movement as a nationalist diversion by the bourgeoisie in order to sidetrack the imminent and inevitable worker's revolution, but supported it nonetheless. The workers hoped that Catalan bourgeoisie would assist them in carrying out a Spanish version of Russia's February Revolution. Serge's *Memoirs* recount that "three months after the news of the Russian Revolution, the Comité Obrero began to prepare a revolutionary general strike, entered negotiations for a political alliance with the Catalan liberal bourgeoisie, and calmly planned the overthrow of the monarchy."⁴ What is remarkable in these forgotten pages of history is the extent to which the Spanish workers were inspired by the February Revolution in distant Russia. According to Serge, "the demands of the Workers' Committee, established in June 1917 and published by *Solidaridad Obrero* ('Workers' Solidarity') anticipated the accomplishments of Soviet Russia." On the basis of this historical coincidence, Serge's novel develops his theme of power in complex counterpoint.



Serge arrived in Barcelona in February 1917, fresh out of a French penitentiary⁵—expelled to Spain after serving five years straight time for his implication in the notorious 1913 trial of the Tragic Bandits of French anarchism. It was in Barcelona, in April 1917, that Victor Kibalchich, heretofore best known by his anarcho-individualist *nom de guerre* 'The Maverick' (Le Rétif), first began signing his articles 'Victor Serge.' Significantly, the subject was the fall of the Czar, and the name-change symbolized Victor's simultaneous political rebirth and return to his Russian roots.⁶

Victor soon found a job working as a printer at the firm of Auber i Pla, earning poverty wages of four pesetas (about eighty American cents) for a nearly twelve-hour working day and joined the small, thirty-member printers' union there. Within a few weeks, he and his workmates were swept up in the growing wave of social unrest. Soon

4 *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, 63.

5 The setting for his first novel, *Men in Prison* (Oakland: PM Press, 2014).

6 Victor Serge, "Un zar cae," *Tierra y libertad*, Barcelona, April 4, 1917, 1.

accepted by the local revolutionaries, Victor became an intimate of their outstanding leader, Salvador Seguí, affectionately known as *Nay del Sucre* ('Sugarplum'), the inspiration for the character of Dario in *Birth of Our Power*. Here is how Serge recalled Seguí in his *Memoirs*, where he is introduced as "Barcelona's hero of the hour, the quickening spirit, the uncrowned leader, the fearless man of politics who distrusted politicians."

A worker, and usually dressed like a worker coming home from the job, cloth cap squashed down on his skull, shirt collar unbuttoned under his cheap tie; tall, strapping, round-headed, his features rough, his eyes big, shrewd, and sly under heavy lids, of an ordinary degree of ugliness, but intensely charming to meet and with his whole self displaying an energy that was lithe and dogged, practical, intelligent, and without the slightest affectation. To the Spanish working-class movement he brought a new role: that of the superb organizer. He was no anarchist, but rather a libertarian, quick to scoff at resolutions on "harmonious life under the sun of liberty," "the blossoming of the self," or "the future society"; he posed instead the immediate problems of wages, organization, rents, and revolutionary power. And that was his tragedy: he could not allow himself to raise aloud this central problem, that of power. I think we were the only ones to discuss it in private. . . . Together with Seguí, I followed the negotiations between the Catalan liberal bourgeoisie and the Comité Obrero. It was a dubious alliance, in which the partners feared, justifiably mistrusted, and subtly outmaneuvered one another. Seguí summed up the position: "They would like to use us and then do us down. For the moment, we are useful in their game of political blackmail. Without us they can do nothing: we have the streets, the shock troops, the brave hearts among the people. We know this, but we need them. They stand for money, trade, possible legality (at the beginning, anyway), the press, public opinion, etc."⁷

Serge recalled having been pessimistic about the possibilities of victory in such a poorly prepared fight, allied with a class whose interests the workers didn't share. "Unless there's a complete victory, which I don't believe in, they're ready to abandon us at the first difficulty. We're

⁷ *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, 64–65.

betrayed in advance.” The Workers’ Committee, entirely too Bakuninist, failed to fully analyze the situation and prepare for all eventualities. They were certain of taking Barcelona, but what about Madrid? And the rest of Spain? Would they overthrow the monarchy?

Power. This, Victor saw, was the problem, the only one that counted. And no one in Barcelona seemed to be posing it besides him and Seguí. Once the city was taken, then what? How was it to be governed? “We had no other example before our eyes but that of the Paris Commune of 1871, and seen from up close it wasn’t encouraging: lack of determination, division, needless blather, competition between men lacking in eminence.” What was lacking was a head. “Masses overflowing with energy, impelled by a great, inchoate idealism, many good rank and file militants, and no head.” And all these lacks could be laid at the feet of the anarchists who didn’t want to hear about the seizure of power. “They refused to see that the Workers’ Committee, once victorious, would be Catalonia’s government of tomorrow.”

The February Revolution in Russia was also headless, and as Serge had accurately seen from Barcelona, it was soon co-opted by socialist lawyers who continued to send the poor peasants into the trenches while denying them the land reform for which they had made the revolution. But the Russian Revolution did not remain headless for long, and with the return of exiled revolutionaries like Trotsky and Lenin in April 1917 it found its leaders: organized professional revolutionaries who were not afraid of taking power. Serge’s lifelong admiration for these leaders, despite his reservations and criticisms, is rooted in this fact. On the other hand, political power, even in the hands of the purest revolutionaries, is a double-edged sword, ready to turn against the revolution itself. This irony of ‘defeat in victory’ in Petrograd becomes palpable in the final chapters of *Birth of Our Power* and is the central theme of Serge’s next novel, the ironically titled *Conquered City* (1932).

In an imaginary dialogue with Dario, the narrator of *Birth of Our Power* sums up his feelings about the June 1917 Barcelona uprising and its predictable defeat titled ‘Meditation on Victory’:

Tomorrow is full of greatness. We will not have brought this victory to ripeness in vain. This city will be taken, if not by our hands, at least by others like ours, but stronger. Stronger perhaps for having been better hardened, thanks to our very weakness. If we are beaten, other men, infinitely different from us, infinitely like

us, will walk, on a similar evening, in ten years, in twenty years (how long is really without importance) down this *rambla*, meditating on the same victory. Perhaps they will think about our blood. Even now I think I see them and I am thinking about their blood, which will flow too. But they will take the city.

These lines, penned in Leningrad in 1930, turned out to be prophetic. Five years later, in 1936–1937, the Barcelona workers were ‘in the saddle,’ to use Orwell’s classic expression. By then, Serge’s friend Seguí had been murdered by the bosses’ *pistoleros*, but a new generation of Barcelona revolutionaries had replaced them. These included Serge’s friends among Spanish workers’ leaders like Angel Pestana the anarcho-syndicalist and Andrés Nin of the independent Marxist POUM, who briefly shared power in Barcelona during the early days of the Spanish Civil War, only to be betrayed and assassinated by the Stalinists. Serge’s 1930 meditation, set on the eve of a doubtful July 1917 insurrection, has thus acquired new layers of historical irony.

Meanwhile, back in July 1917, Victor Kibalchich’s personal Odyssey took a new departure. When the Barcelona uprising fizzled, he heeded the call of Revolutionary Russia, the land of his exiled Russian revolutionary parents, the land where in February the ‘we’ of *Birth of Our Power* succeeded in overthrowing the Czar and are now contesting for power under the pro-Allied Provisional Government. The road to Russia led through wartime Paris, where, in order to be repatriated to revolutionary Russia, Victor tried to join the Russian forces still fighting on the Western Front. There, he found his former French anarchist comrades mostly demoralized and was soon arrested and thrown into a French detention camp for ‘undesirables.’

Précigné (depicted in the novel as ‘Crécy’) was one of seventy officially nominated ‘concentration camps’ set up during World War I into which the French Republic threw anarchists, pacifists, refugees from German-occupied Belgian and dozens of other countries, Gypsies, prostitutes, and even an odd American ambulance driver (the poet E.E. Cummings, whose *Enormous Room* is often compared to this section of Serge’s novel). At the end of the war, after sixteen months of captivity, Victor was released as part of an exchange of alleged ‘Bolsheviks’ (including children!) imprisoned in France for an equal number French officers held hostage by the Soviets. Accompanied by a group of returning revolutionary exiles, Serge-Kibalchich debarked in Red Petrograd

and joined the Revolution on the side of the Bolsheviks at the darkest moment of the Civil War.

Serge's Literary 'Restraint'

In a review of *Birth of Our Power* published in Paris in 1931, Marcel Martinet, Serge's literary mentor, praised his style for its 'restraint' (*pudeur*) and its total absence of exhibitionism. However, Martinet also wondered aloud if these virtues were not "defects" in a novel. Comparing Serge to Jules Vallès, the revered revolutionary novelist of the Paris Commune, Martinet demanded of him more emotional expressiveness (*pathétique*).⁸

From Leningrad, Serge replied to his mentor, explaining apologetically that his years in prison had hardened him and made him incapable of that kind of romantic literary emotional expressiveness. On the other hand, subtly defending his post-romantic twentieth-century modernist aesthetic, Serge pointed out that his style was appropriate to the modern age: "I wonder if Vallès' emotional temperament would be able to withstand the singular power of the telephone in an age of terror. The formidable killing machines invented and put in place since 1914 have succeeded in obliterating some of man's essential instincts."

Such is Serge's restraint that the reader of his 'semiautobiographical' *Birth of Our Power* would have no idea that 1917–1919 was a critical time in the personal and political life of its author. Serge's narrator functions as a camera-eye, presenting the reader with a series of jump-cut scenes, sharing his political reflections but nothing of his personal life. Through the narrator's eye, we see Barcelona as a vibrant, joyful, sun-washed city, but in fact Serge's *Memoirs* tell us that prison was still hanging heavily over his head and that he was obsessed with guilt at having escaped the common fate of his generation: participation in the great slaughter that was World War I. He also went through a political crisis. It was in Barcelona that Kibaltchich settled his score with French anarcho-individualism, was drawn to syndicalism under the influence of the charismatic workers' leader Salvador Seguí (Dario in the novel), returned to the orbit of his Russian forebears, and metamorphosed himself into "Victor Serge."

8 Review of *Birth of Our Power* by Marcel Martinet, the poet and theoretician of proletarian culture in France, *Comptes rendus, Europe* 105, no. 15 (September 1931): 122–23.

Nor do Serge's mainly political *Memoirs* divulge that their author also went through a sentimental crisis during this period. Victor had been in love with Rirette Maitrejean, his coeditor of the Paris journal *l'anarchie* since 1910. It was partly to shield her that he took the rap in the 1913 'anarchist bandit' trial that landed him in the penitentiary for five years. Rirette, who was a great beauty and took 'free love' literally, joined her lover in Barcelona after his release from prison, but she did not stay long, and her departure left him desolate. Nor did Serge ever talk about the serious emotional crisis he passed through during the year he spent in the French concentration camp at Fleury-en-Bière (Cummings's *Enormous Room*) before being transferred to Précigné ('Trécy' in the novel).

Liberated a month after the Armistice, Victor fell in love again in 1919, on the ship taking him to Red Russia through mine- and iceberg-infested waters, and for once his personal, sentimental interest is reflected in the novel. He bonded with another returning Francophone revolutionary exile, Alexander Russakov, a Russian-Jewish tailor and idealistic anarchist, the father of five children (and the model for 'Old Levine' in the novel). Victor fell in love with Alexander's oldest daughter, Liouba Russakova, the 'child woman' whose haunting portrait illuminated by firelight appears in "The Laws Are Burning," in the climactic scene that ends the novel. In Petrograd Victor lived in a collective apartment with the Russakovs, forming a Franco-Russian household, and a year later Liouba give birth to their son, Vladimir Kibalchich.⁹ It was in this collective apartment, now invaded by a resident GPU informer, that Serge, now an outcast, wrote *Birth of Our Power* during 1929–1930.

Nonetheless, there is almost nothing 'confessional' in *Birth of Our Power*, Serge's most autobiographical novel (or for that matter in his so-called *Memoirs*).¹⁰ Indeed, the novel tells us next to nothing about the narrator's (or Serge's) personal life. The true subject of the novel is not Serge's personal rebirth but the rebirth and coming to consciousness of the worldwide workers' movement after its collapse into the fratricidal nationalisms of World War I. Although the 'plot' follows the narrator's

9 See his website at <http://www.vlady.org>. 'Vlady' (as he signed himself) grew up as Serge's companion in deportation and exile, one of the 'comrades.' In Mexico, where his father died in 1947, he became a well-known painter and muralist. Part of his work is dedicated to his father, and in the course of many conversations over the years, helped me to understand Serge's life and works.

10 The title *Memoirs of a Revolutionary* was invented by the publisher.

somewhat picaresque wanderings, his near-anonymity shifts the reader's focus to the true 'hero' of Serge's novel, which is not an 'I' but a 'we.'

Serge's Collective Hero

Underlying *Birth of Our Power*, indeed running through all of Serge's novels, there is a permanent and collective protagonist, a revolutionary subject, identified the 'comrades,' the 'we' of *Birth of Our Power*, the permanent revolutionaries of all lands and epochs, the invisible international. Behind this self-identified cohort stand the masses themselves—the workers, the poor farmers, the youth, the downtrodden and dispossessed—who are ever present in Serge's novels. In this vision, individual rebels may be obliterated, but "the comrades" will always exist, gagged, exiled, jailed, or storming the heavens on the wave of revolution. So too the masses, in victory or in defeat, ensuring that no defeat will be permanent.¹¹

Serge's concept of 'we' as collective subject flows directly from his spiritual heritage as a child of exiled members of Russia's unique revolutionary intelligentsia for whom the meaning of life was to understand, to participate, to consciously integrate oneself into the process of history. He also spoke out of a long experience of European worker militancy and a lifelong identification with the international revolutionary movement. He saw himself as one of its 'bards.'

As an organic intellectual of the working class, Serge's 'Marxism' was as integral to his vision of his narrator's epic journey as Dante's Christianity to his narrator's road from *Inferno* to *Paradiso*. Serge conceived literature as "a means of expressing to men what most of them live inwardly without being able to express, as a means of communion, a testimony to the vast flow of life through us, whose essential aspects we must try to fix for the benefit of those who will come after us." He concluded, "I was thus in the main line of Russian writers."¹²

Serge believed that fiction, what he called 'truthful' fiction, could communicate aspects of the revolution better than history or theory. Although definitely a writer with a 'message,' his technique was to bring experience to life on the page in all its multiplicity, using the modernist

11 By the end of Serge's life, most of the comrades in Europe and Russia whom he had immortalized as a collective hero had been exterminated by Hitler's Gestapo and Stalin's GPU. Serge's posthumous novel, *Unforgiving Years*, depicts the fate of a few survivors of this hecatomb.

12 Serge, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, 346.

device of stream-of-consciousness to multiply perspectives on a single action. For example, in the splendid bullfight scene in Barcelona on the eve of the uprising, we see the action simultaneously from a kaleidoscope of viewpoints: wealthy spectators seated on the shady side of the ring, armed workers in the bleachers opposite, the Killer down in the ring and facing him . . . the bull! The whole spectacle becomes symbolic of the class confrontation that will take place on the morrow, and the masses identify both with the powerful, angry, tormented beast and with the agile, skilled Killer—who is, after all, one of *them*, a poor cowboy risking death for money.

In *Birth of Our Power*, more than anywhere else, it is Serge's collective hero, the "comrades," the first-person plural pronoun of the title, who supply the underlying unity to the novel. It is "we" who awaken to power in Barcelona, "we" who suffer the frustrations of confinement in France, "we" who must face the problem of power in Petrograd. The collective hero is introduced in the first chapter of *Birth of Our Power*, significantly titled "This City and Us." How does Serge characterize this "we"? Neither as an ideological abstraction nor through any blurring sentimentality, but quite matter-of-factly:

There were at least forty or fifty of us, coming from every corner of the world—even a Japanese, the wealthiest of us all, a student at the university—and a few thousand in the factories and shops of that city: comrades, that is to say more than brothers by blood or law, brothers by a common bond of thought, habit, language, and mutual aid. . . . No organization held us together, but none has ever had as much real and authentic solidarity as our fraternity of fights without leaders, without rules, and without ties.

Dario, El Chorro, Zilz, Jurien, José Miro, Lejeune, Ribas, and the other comrades whom Serge introduces here are not idealized; indeed, some turn out to be actual betrayers. But, although each is a perfectly individualized type (Serge excelled in the ability to create a sharp, living portrait with a few rapid strokes), they are at the same time representative of thousands of others: the rebels of every time and place.

Later, in the center section of the novel, after Serge has introduced us to the world of the concentration camp (another microcosm, with its deportees from every land, its criminals, its capitalists, its idealists and madmen) we meet another group of comrades. This time it is the organized group of Russian revolutionary prisoners, for whom

solidarity is not just a word but the only means of survival against starvation, epidemics, and the psychological ravages of life in the camp. There is Krafft, the doctrinaire Bolshevik who strangely refuses to return to Russia when he has the chance; Fomine, the white-maned old rebel who is too worn out to face the long-awaited revolution when it finally comes; Sonnenschein, the Jew who can settle any political argument with a folk tale that reminds you of Sholom Aleichem; Karl and Gregor, sailors from an American battleship, two silent giants who more and more incarnate the power of the revolution as they move closer and closer to their goal; Sam, "Uncle Sam," the ironic paradoxical character who is the most devoted revolutionary and yet—a double-agent. The chapter title is "Us."

We formed a world apart within this city. It sufficed for one of us to call the others together with that magic word "Comrades," and we would feel united, brothers without even needing to say it, sure of understanding each other even in our misunderstandings. We had a quiet little room with four cots, the walls papered with maps, a table loaded with books. There were always a few of us there, poring over the endlessly annotated, commented, summarized texts. There Saint-Just, Robespierre, Jacque Roux, Babeuf, Blanqui, Bakunin were spoken of as if they had just come down to take a stroll under the trees. . . .

When there are six of us around a table, we have the experience of all the continents, all the oceans, all the pain and the revolt of men: the Labor parties of New South Wales, the vain apostleship of Theodor Herzl, the Mooney trail, the struggles of the Magón brothers in California, Pancho Villa, Zapata, syndicalism, anarchism, Malatesta's exemplary life, anarcho-individualism and the death of those bandits who wanted to be "new men," Hervéism, social democracy, the work of Lenin—as yet unknown to the world—all the prisons.

Here, the meaning of "the comrades" is extended not only across oceans and continents but backwards in time, with Robespierre and the others, and forward into the future with Karl and Gregor, with Lenin. However, if like Malraux's "virile fraternity," Serge's "comrades" were held together only by a common heroism or by a subjective feeling, the novels might be moving, but they would not have the solid foundation nor the biting realism they do in fact exhibit. But the basis here is

not sentiment but necessity, objective social truth, as Serge shows in a characteristic scene of “epiphany” or unveiling, where realistic detail is used to reveal a social reality, in the chapter titled “The Essential Thing.”

At last the small band of revolutionary exiles reach the famous Finland station in Petrograd, the scene of Lenin’s triumphant return. Serge creates a scene of anti-climax. As the narrator listens to the official welcoming speech, his eyes wander over the freezing musicians standing the cold in their shabby, mismatched uniforms. The trombone player had put on a pair of “magnificent green gloves. Others had red hands, stiffened by the cold. Some wore old gloves, of leather or cloth and full of holes.” Their appearance expresses nothing but “hunger and fatigue.” The narrator reflects:

Never could the idea come to anyone to rush forward toward them with outstretched hand saying *Brothers!* for they belonged entirely to a world where words, feelings, fine sentiments, shed their prestige immediately on contact with primordial realities. . . . I stared intensely at these silent men, standing there in such great distress. I thanked them for teaching me already about true fraternity, which is neither in sentiments nor in words, but in shared pain and shared bread. If I had no bread to share with them, I must keep silent and take my place at their side: and we would go off somewhere to fight or to fall together, and would thus be brothers, without saying so and perhaps without even loving each other. Loving each other? What for? Staying alive, that’s what counts.

Rarely has the true heroism of the revolution been presented in a grimmer, more realistic light. The ragged, starving musicians are not pathetic. They are just there, a fact. They are there because necessity has put them there. They are comrades, not out of love, but because the revolution has given them a common social destiny—or a common death. And Serge, in this scene, has managed to epitomize a whole world and the individual’s relation to it, in the outlandish green gloves of a shivering trombone player.

“The Laws Are Burning”

The final chapter in *Birth of Our Power*, titled “The Laws Are Burning,” is based on an actual incident that took place in February 1919 when, soon after their arrival in Petrograd, the Soviet authorities moved Victor and the Russakov family into a vast empty apartment formerly occupied by

a senator. This assignment was no privilege. The reason there were so many palaces vacant is that it was impossible to heat them, and floorboards were quickly consumed. How to cope with this problem? The climactic passage of Serge's novel reveals the practical solution and in so doing transforms essentially anecdotal material into a concretely significant symbolic structure, what Serge's contemporary Joyce, applying a religious notion to literature, termed an 'epiphany.'

The Levines had gathered in the smallest of the rooms, probably a nursery, furnished with two iron bedsteads with gilded balls on which only the mattresses remained . . . (one of them appeared stained with blood). This candle-lit room was like a corner in steerage on an immigrant ship. The children had fallen asleep on the baggage, rolled up in blankets. The mother was resting in a low armchair. The young woman, like a solemn child, with large limpid eyes which seemed by turns distended by fear and then victorious over the fleeting shadows, was dreaming before the open stove, the reddish glow of which illuminated from below her graceful hands, her thin neck, and her fine features. Old Levine's footsteps echoed on the floor of the grand salon, plunged in darkness. He entered, his arms loaded with heavy green-covered books which he dropped softly next to the stove. Silent laughter illuminated his ruddy face.

"The laws are burning!" he said.

The friendly warmth in front of which the young woman was stretching out her hands came from the flames which were devouring Tome XXVII of the *COLLECTION OF THE LAWS OF THE EMPIRE*. For fun, I pulled out a half-burned page, edged with incandescent lace. The flames revealed these words forming a chapter heading: CONCERNING LANDED PROPERTY . . . and, further down: ". . . the rights of collateral heirs . . ."

The anecdote of "The Laws Are Burning" is an example of the *petit fait vrai*, the commonplace observation which Stendhal prized so highly for its undeniable authenticity and consequent ability to authenticate a whole idea, description, or emotional effect. Serge has dramatized it and given it symbolic significance by turning it into 'Jewish humor.' Old Levine's exclamation is the punchline of an elaborately prepared visual pun, albeit a pun which could only be understood in a precise historical situation. Like any pun, this one is based on a verbal ambiguity—the basis of much of the power of poetry as well. Since laws

cannot “burn” in any material sense, the effect created by “The laws are burning!” explodes like a Surrealist poem or an anarchist slogan; a powerful image of the violence and destructive energy of revolution.

Yet, as the text unfolds, the same destructive energy of the flames which “devour” Tome XXVII of the *Laws* is revealed as the “friendly warmth” toward which the young girl stretches out her hands, while the final image, that of “*Landed Property*” and “*the rights of collateral heirs*” framed in the “incandescent lace” of the flames suggests yet another possibility: that the social class represented by the Levine family, merely in order to survive, to keep warm, has been obliged to obliterate the society based on property and all its heirs (the class represented by the senator’s family) in the course of its struggle for existence.

The passage evokes a whole complex of interconnected social, political, and historical relationships of individuals and classes which can be understood only in terms of an actual historical event *outside of* the text (the transfer of power of 1917)—an event which is in turn illuminated and made comprehensible for the reader with greater force and with more complexity through this purely “literary” text than it could be through any amount of abstract historical analysis. It is within this context that the passage’s climax (beginning with the exclamation “The laws are burning!”) acquires a richness and symbolism that goes far beyond its purely “realistic” function as an authenticating *petit fait vrai*.

Victor’s achingly romantic vision of his beloved Liouba as she must have appeared in 1919 comes through in this climactic passage, which must, for the author, have already been tinged with nostalgia. For by 1930, when Serge penned this touching portrait of a fearful child-woman, Liouba had already been diagnosed as insane, essentially driven mad by the persecutions to which she and her family had been subject as a result of her husband’s refusal to renounce his principled opposition to Stalinism. This is as close as Serge gets to confessional in this ‘autobiographical’ novel, whose principle literary quality is its ‘restraint.’

Serge thus brings his final chapter to a climax on a note of ironic lyricism, but it is not the traditionally triumphal lyricism of Red Armies marching into the sunset. The vision is rather one of a necessary but ambiguous victory, of a new class placed precariously and uneasily in the seat of power, beset by internal and external threats and ironically conscious that the power which has been sought for so long and at such great cost will present greater problems in the future than any the powerless have ever dreamed of. Here Serge brings the stamp of

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