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Branko Milanovic is reading Victor Sergeâ€™s *Notebooks*:

> **Branko Milanovic**: The book of the dead: â€˜Born to Russian anti-Czarist emigrÃ©s in Belgium in 1890 => engaged in revolutionary anarchist activity as a teenager in France => condemned to five years in jail at 17 => expelled to Spain => exchanged for French soldiers held by the Bolsheviks in 1919 => joined the Bolsheviks => participated in the Civil War and worked for the Comintern => joined the Left Opposition after Kronstadt rebellion => arrested, imprisoned in Lublianka in 1928 => released => member of the Trotskyist opposition => arrested again in 1933 and exiled to Siberia => released after international protests and sent to France in 1936 => joined POUM and fought in Spain => fled to France after Francoâ€™s victory => left France on a refugee boat to Mexico in 1941 => engaged in Trotskyist activities in Mexico=> died in 1947. How does that look for a biography? Incredibleâ€¦ but not an unusual one for the people among whom Serge moved and lived. His *Notebooks*â€¦ are a compelling mixture of historical reminiscences, reflections on Marxism and psychoanalysis, attacks on Stalinist totalitarianism (the term is often used), defense of democratic socialism, descriptions of Mexico, literary criticism, and art historyâ€¦. The entire Who Is Who of the artistic and revolutionary world of continental Europe is included in these notes. There is, it seems, no significant revolutionary nor writer or painter whom Serge has not metâ€¦

There is one way in which Victor Serge was very exceptional among the Old Bolsheviks. He, as AbbÃ© Sieyes put it, survived. And he remembered all those who did not:

Preface to the 1938 Edition:

> In January 1930, in Leningrad, I finished off the last pages of this book and began the first pages of the original Foreword which follows. Eight years have flowed by since then. And what years! This book, based entirely on contemporary documents, written in daily contact with participants in the revolution and with the unique purpose of establishing, however hastily, the truth, which was already under threat, has had singular destiny. . . . Today it has become one of the rare witness-based overviews of this period, which, although past and gone, has by the force of circumstance once again become topical, standing out as more alive than most of the works on the subject published since.
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> A certain number of histories have appeared in the USSR. All those that came out before 1937 have now been removed from circulation, removed from libraries, and destroyed. Merely reading or owning one is punishable. For official history, having been ordered to follow the path of the most impudent and bafoonish falsifications, is actively working to destroy the documents, the memoirs, the memory and even the official acts of recent times! Let anyone who reads Russian compare and confront the successive editions of the encyclopedic dictionaries published by the Moscow State Library and he will understand the moderation and exactitude of my statements.
>
> It was my hope to continue this study of the Russian Revolution. Even in captivity, I continued accumulating notes, texts and testimony and setting to paper the draft of a book as ample as this one, whose title was to be Year Two. When I left Russia, banished, in April 1936, with all these materials as well as two other books completely finished, the fruit of long years of labor were seized illegally (the word provokes a smile) by the political police.1 Other scholars, another day, will write Year Two, but their job wonâ€™t be easy, for the men of that time, and with them, their works, are being liquidated.
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> Let us consider for a moment the roads taken by the Russian Revolution these past eight years.
>
> In 1925â€“26, the Revolution is entering what one might call a fourth phase. Economic reconstruction has been completed, a fact which, only five years after the end of the civil war, constitutes an admirable success in a sorely tried country, thrown back on its own resources, where the laboring classes have to take everything into their own hands. The 1913 levels of production and consumption have been attained. From now on, production must be expanded to reach the level of the big European countries. All problems now appear as a function of the relations between agriculture and industry, the peasantry and the dictatorship of the proletariat.
>
> It is at this moment when the men of 1917â€“18 become aware of worrisome transformations within the Party and the State. Power is escaping from their hands, passing over to new men, the Johnny-come-latelys of the revolution, ensconced in the offices of the governing party, men for whom the Secretary General of the Central Committeeâ€”a fifty-something Georgian Bolshevik barely known during the decisive years of the revolution, Iossif (Joseph) Djugachvili (Stalin), ex-Koba of the Caucasian terrorist organizations (1906â€“07)â€”has become the living symbol and the devious, hardnosed leader.

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The ideology changes, although the murky arguments respect its external forms in order to retain the prestige of the old ideas. The best known and most illustrious of the fighters of the early days, Leninâ€™s collaborators, with Trotsky in the lead, propose industrialization and democratization, first of the Party, then of the systemâ€”an actively revolutionary international policy, particularly in the Chinese Revolution, largely influenced by the Russians.2 They are expelled at the end of 1927, soon to be imprisoned or deported. The author of this book shares their fate.

The grain crisis, caused by the inability of a socialized industry too weak to meet the needs of the farmers, obliges the Stalin-Rykov-Bukharin triumvirate (which succeeds the Stalin-Zinoviev-Kamenev triumvirate) to impose on the country the near-total forced collectivization of agriculture at the same time as the first Five-Year Plan. Unable to provide the peasants with a merchandize-equivalent of their grain, it is necessary to make them plant and sow under constraint. The years 1926â€“28 are the years of an extremely profound political crisis. They see the bureaucracyâ€”still far from realizing full collective self-consciousnessâ€”drive out of power the revolutionaries who had built the Soviet state.

The forced collectivization of agriculture leads to the eviction and deportation of several million peasants, the destruction of livestock and the general famine of the years 1930â€“34. This new phase of the regimeâ€™s evolution is marked by the recourse to terror against the peasants, the technicians and the workers (to a lesser degree) and by obscure struggles within the ruling circles, which nonetheless ceaselessly trumpet their â€˜monolithicâ€™ unity on every occasion. Little by little, the persecution of hidden opposition becomes institutionalized in the Party. The Republic of the Soviets, while building itself a new and formidable industrial infrastructure at an incredible cost in human labor and suffering, becomes a totalitarian state in which police terror is the principal means by which the â€˜Political Bureauâ€™ governs.

Such a transformation implies both a profound betrayal and modification of the social structure, the two phenomena being so totally interconnected as to be one. If the ideas of 1917â€“18, officially venerated, are in reality trampled upon, this is because the egalitarian revolution, fifteen years on, has ended with a new inequality, profound enough and stable enough to generate an irremediable antagonism between order-givers and order-takers, between the administrators of collectivized wealth, and masters of the state, and the newly exploited working masses. Such is the outcome of a socialist revolution led by a too-weak proletariat in an immense agricultural land surrounded by countries remaining capitalist.

This situation led to the terrible political crisis of 1936â€“37 in the course of which the dictator of the bureaucracy undertook the successive liquidation first of the Old Party, the Party of the Revolution and the Civil War, and then of his own party, which carried him into power against the former but which was still too permeated with socialist ideas.

The best known Bolsheviks perished, shot, after monstrous trials where their very loyalty, knowingly manipulated by an inquisition, was used to dishonor them by means of false confessions. Others, less celebrated, perished by the hundreds and thousands, shot without a trial. Obscure participants in the revolution, hundreds of thousands of these, filled the concentration camps while a supposedly â€˜democraticâ€™ Constitution was handed down by the Leader. Six months later, the authors of that constitution are no more. During the elections, dozens of candidates and newly elected representatives to the new Councils (supposedly inviolable) disappeared. But the constitution leaves no trace of the old Soviets, conceived in 1917 as the essential organs of the state.3

Of the outstanding men whose names appear in the pages of this book, only one survives: Trotsky, hunted for nearly ten years and a refugee in Mexico. Lenin, Dzerzhinsky and Chichirin, having died in time, thus avoided proscription. Zinoviev, Kamenev, Rykov, Bukharin were shot. Among the combatants of the November 1917 insurrection, the hero of Moscow, Muralov, was shot. Anonov-Ovseenko, who led the assault on the Winter Palace, disappeared in prison. Kyrlenko, Dybenko, Shliapnikov, Bliebov-Avilov, all members of the first Council of Peoplesâ€™ Commissars, succumbed to the same fate as Smilga, who led the Baltic Fleet, as Riaznov, as Sokolnikov and Bubnov of the insurrectional Political Bureau: all in prison if they are still living. Karakhan, negotiator at Brest-Litovsk, shot. Of the two first leaders of Soviet Ukraine, one Piatakov, was shot; the other, Rakovski, a broken old man, is in prison. The heroes of the battles of Sviajsk and the Volga, Ivan Smirnov, Rosengolt and Tukhachevsky, shot. Raskolnikov, outlawed, has disappeared. Among the fighters of the Ural, Mratchkovsky was shot, Bieloborodov disappeared in prison. Sapronov and Vladimir Smirnov, Moscow fighters, disappeared in prison. Similarly Preobrajensky, the theoretician of war communism, and Sosnovsky, Bolshevik Party spokesman at the first Central Executive of the dictatorship, shot. Also Enukidze, first secretary of that Executive. Nadejda Krupskaya, Leninâ€™s companion, lives out her last days in who knows what kind of indescribable captivity.

Of the men of the German revolution, Joffe committed suicide; Karl Radek is in prison; Krestinski, who continued their action in Germany, was shot. Of the socialist-revolutionary opposition of 1918, Maria Spiridovnov, Trutovsky, Kamkov, and Karelin probably survive, but have been in captivity for the past eighteen years. Blumkin, who went over to the Communist Party, shot. Of the men who during Year II made sure the revolution survived victorious, only a small number survive for the moment. The military leaders of the first Red Armies, Kork, Iakir, Uborevich, Primakov, and Mulevich, were shot. Evdokimov and Bakayev, the defenders of Petrograd, shot. The Bolsheviks of the Caucasus, Mdivani, Okudjava, and Eliava, shot. Likewise shot FayÃ§ulla Khodjayev, who played a big part in the sovietization of Central Asia. The President of the Council of Commissars of the Hungarian Soviets, Bela-Kun, disappeared in prison. . . .

The revolutionary victory, all things considered, caused relatively few losses among the victors. Eighteen years later, on the contrary, the bureaucratic reaction, which conquered power without fighting, annihilated a whole generation, carried off in waves of blood and filth . . . thatâ€™s where things stand today. One of the essential problems of the moment is to know if the totalitarian dictatorship in its present form, that is to say a terrorist police state, is compatible with the simple functioning of nationalized production. There are reasons to doubt this.

The immense enterprise of social transformation, begun in 1917 in a backward land devastated by war, remains nonetheless in many ways admirable because of the energies and the hopes it raised up and by its historical advances. The foundation remains for a new order no longer based on private property of the means of production but on socialized property. This economy, regulated by a single plan and despite being in the hands of an often unintelligent and almost always brutal power, has shown itself endowed with extraordinary vitality and creative capacity.

One would really have to despair of man and ignore everything about the paths of history to conclude that the present reaction, which reminds us in so many ways of the Russian despotism of centuries past, is the Russian Revolutionâ€™s final word. This nightmare state will be carried off, like so many other have been before it. The true balance sheet of the Russian Revolution can only be drawn when the seeds sown so generously by a great people during the years of its rising have grown up.

Victor Serge
Paris, September 1938
Translated by Richard Greeman