

VICTOR SERGE

Victor Serge (1890–1947) spent the last six years of his life in Mexico, joining the exodus from Marseille in 1941 and remaining behind after the War. Here he completed his two most celebrated works. *Memoirs of a Revolutionary* evokes his vagabond anarchist youth, passage to revolutionary Russia, years as assistant to Zinoviev in the Comintern and *Left Oppositionist*, prison, exile; a cast of thousands from the Old Bolshevik generation recalled in vivid detail. *The Case of Comrade Tulayev* was the most powerful of his 'documentary novels' on the turmoil of the inter-war years. Extracts from Serge's 1944, 45 and 47 diaries had appeared in *Les Temps modernes* in 1949 and were collected in a 1953 French volume, which also included notebooks from the 1930s. In 2010, three cardboard boxes of his papers were discovered in the archive of his late widow Laurette Séjourné in the small Mexican town of Amecameca. They included letters, drafts, photographs and a bundle of exercise books, tied up with string, covering the years 1941, 42, 43 and 46. Agone has now published the entire collection as *Carnets (1936–1947)*. NLR's selection takes up the narrative of Serge's life where the *Memoirs* end, on the boat from Marseille. The notebooks contain thoughts on the world-political situation, impressions of Mexico, often caustic portraits of fellow exiles. Peter Sedgwick, his English editor, has pointed out the influence of Sorel in Serge's anarcho-syndicalist formation: the Sorelian notion of a moral elite, alien to Marxism, informed his belief that the direction of history 'depends to a very large extent on the calibre of individual human beings', hence his remorseless judgements on his fellow men, seen in terms of their fitness for the revolution. His political assessments were often wide of the mark. Early predictions of a Soviet defeat and the collapse of Stalin's regime give way to over-estimations of Moscow's power; cautious prognostications for a limited social-democratic politics in post-war Europe are followed by speculations on an 'acceptable' technocratic collectivism. Serge boasted of conceiving the notion of parallel 'totalitarianisms', that most threadbare of Cold War liberalism's tropes, yet wrote in 1947, 'If the Soviet regime is to be criticized, let it be from a socialist and working-class point of view'. Of his comrades in the Mexico group *Socialismo y Libertad*, the French left-socialist Marceau Pivert would become a committed opponent of the Algerian War in the 1950s, while POUM veteran Julián Gorkín enlisted with the Congress for Cultural Freedom. Serge's likely trajectory had he lived beyond 1947 must remain a matter for speculation.

VICTOR SERGE

MEXICAN NOTEBOOKS

1940–1947

MARSEILLE, WINTER 1940–41. Narrow back streets dingy by day, lost in the shadows by night, criss-crossed by washing lines draped with clothes strung from the windows. Narrow and slippery, the stone oozing poverty, magnificent ancient mansions now lairs with vast entrances like caverns (carved gates, rue de la Prison). Stench. Pizzas, Greek, Russian, Annamite, Chinese restaurants. Rue de la Bouterie, the brothels with their lights out, Chat Noir, Magdeleine, Lucy, locked doors for the rush of sailors, notices in several languages. At the bottom of the alleyway, the port's bright lights, spindly masts, Notre-Dame-de-la-Garde on the golden rock in the distance, the azure sky.

An Annamite or Chinese procession (funeral, festival?) files past in the rain under banners of cloth and coloured paper. Scampering, the thin, sallow faces of smart but sad coolies.

Lively square, ancient fine houses, baths, the church below the hospital. We go inside to admire the Easter crèche, with all its little figurines at work, sawing wood, shoeing horses, etc. For twenty *sous*, the figures move.

31 March 1941. *People on the Ship*. In search of a comfortable corner, the 'economic emigrants' have installed themselves between the central deck and the boiler room. Jews with money. Rent the crew's cabins, stuff themselves, do deals with the personnel, keep to themselves, are suspicious of everyone, play cards, read *Clochemerle*. We call that corner 'the Champs-Élysées' and we invade it partly because it's sheltered from the wind and the sun. They glare at us.

The foredeck is more crowded but has a slightly chic atmosphere because of a group of filmmakers and wealthy, well-dressed emigrants who behave as if they're on the terrace of a café on the Left Bank.

The upper deck, which isn't a deck strictly speaking but a sort of roof, cluttered with the lifeboats, is occupied by the Lams, the Bretons and Vlady.¹ Jacqueline [Breton] sunbathes almost naked and scorns the world which couldn't care less, and that irks her. Hélène Lam nurses Wifredo, who is ill, with swollen glands, sad, lying under a blanket, his head in his wife's lap. His eyes like those of an ancient Sino-African child are full of an animal misery. Even though he's getting better. I sometimes go up, from there you can see the entire ship and the entire ocean. It's Montparnasse.

In the stern, rough wood tables under the tarpaulins, above the stairs to the hold. Tubs in which René Schickele's daughter does her washing while telling me about Walter Benjamin's suicide in Cerbère, in October 1940, after a fruitless attempt to cross the border without a visa; several friends had just made it to the other side, he failed, he lost his nerve. He sent his last manuscripts to Switzerland. He left us a remarkable essay on Baudelaire. Deck chairs, a sort of cowshed on one side, and on the other, the vile shared toilets made of plywood, erected on the deck. Rigging, tools, hordes of kids, washing, bare-chested characters shaving, ladies lying on their deckchairs in the sun. Our German International Relief Association group studies English and debates Marxism. The Stalinists in discreet little confabs around Kantorowicz and his wife, both thin, with sharp profiles, furrowed faces and a gaze that is both hard and evasive.² Raucous, cheerful Spaniards. It's Belleville.

Towards the bow, our German friends and their kids are setting up a kindergarten; it'll be a little corner of a square in Wedding, which we'll call Rosa Luxemburg Platz.

The apolitical refugees are afraid of the political ones, whom they respect as dangerous people and despise as people without money. The castaways of Europe on a wrecked ship. A war of manners, or rather of boorishness, fighting over a place at the table at mealtimes, fighting over tables outdoors on the cluttered deck, where we eat. People have to fend

¹ Wifredo Lam (1902–1982): Cuban painter, fought for the Republic in Spain, where he met Helena Holzer (1914–2007), a German neurobiologist. André Breton had married Jacqueline Lamba (1910–1993) in 1934. Vlady Kibalchich (1920–2005): Serge's son.

² Alfred Kantorowicz (1899–1979): journalist and KPD member, friend of Brecht and Bloch; fought in Spain, returned to the DDR after 1945 but later defected to West Germany.

for themselves. André [Breton], always noble and appearing impassive—but appalled by all this—repeats: ‘Bastards!’ and makes no secret of the fact that he’d be much happier at the Deux Magots. I rescued an elderly bourgeois couple from a scrum. The man, domed head, wearing glasses, fat and puffed up with respect, for himself and others, tells me he is an Austrian Catholic banker, protected by the Vatican and emigrating to Brazil. ‘What about you?’ What can I tell him? ‘I’m a friend of Mr Trotsky . . .’ Wide-eyed: ‘Oh!’ But he does not stop being polite to me and asking my advice: he’s travelling with two different passports, which one should he use in such-and-such a situation?

6 April 1941. The letters received, sustenance. We’re sailing along the Moroccan coast, low sand dunes. The fringes of the desert. In the distance, the white peaks of the Atlas, stark and rugged. Then the coastline becomes steeper; we are following hills beyond which the Atlas rise, pure, inaccessible, the tragedy of purity in the void.

Towards evening, hills dotted with panther-skin bushes. Africa has its land style as it has its lifestyle. Above these hills, the sky is two colours superimposed, turquoise blue and translucent pink. The stars are coming out. Squatting on ropes, we listen to a Viennese activist talking about the underground movement in Austria under the dictatorship.

Conversation with Claude Lévi-Strauss who describes the police chiefs of São Paulo in Brazil. ‘They are both madmen. One considers himself a noble of superior lineage and collects royal china, autographs of famous people or, failing that, of their secretaries, provided there’s a coat of arms on the notepaper. The other has invented a criminal classification system based on animals: dog-men, cat-men, lizard-men, parrot-men! All that with ultra-modern laboratory equipment.’ We conclude that perhaps it is not as crazy as all that in a field other than criminology.

Calm sea. Germany and Italy declare war on Yugoslavia. The Yugoslavs declare that they are going to take the offensive.

25 May 1941: *Martinique*. Like Guadeloupe, this island is in the hands of a police force recently sent from France, with appointments made in Vichy, but dictated by Paris; in other words, 100 per cent Nazified.³ The special commissioner of the immigration department arrived from the occupied zone. The two real authorities are: the admiralty, led by senior officers of the Laval–Darlan persuasion, hardline, blinkered

³ Serge and his son Vlady were detained for several months in Martinique, then in Haiti and Cuba, reaching Mexico only in September 1941.

reactionaries; and the secret services, very probably under the orders of local German agents. That is the conviction of the people living on the islands and it is also my impression. An atmosphere of suspicion, grassing, informing, wariness. The refugees coming in are scrutinized closely and, in certain cases, must be in danger. Foul play is possible.

The authorities live in panic. Astute pro-German and pro-Vichy propaganda has been very successful. The black population is neither Gaullist nor well disposed towards the Americans; people don't want change, they fear it. The intellectuals are anti-Vichy, pro-English but daren't breathe a word. People are arrested and interned for saying anything slightly risky.

The American consul has no influence. He does nothing to facilitate the refugees' stay or their departure. A French officer warned us: 'Whatever you do don't tell the consul that you're journalists or writers, the Americans don't want any of you . . . Invent different professions.'

November 1941: Mexico. The Old Man's Solitude. He really had no one around him.⁴ Devoted, blinkered bodyguards. Natalia Ivanovna at the end of her tether since the death of Liova, worn out, irritable (not with him). No intellectual company. And completely cut off from Europe and above all from Russia, which he loved more than anything in the world, Russia–Revolution. Completely understand him. Natalia Ivanovna told Vlady that I was the last person to have brought him fresh news from Russia, in 1936! Terrible loneliness, nobody to talk to. The strength and glory of the Russian revolutionaries is that they created a whole atmosphere. Lenin and Trotsky, surrounded by the Bukharins, the Zinovievs, the Lunacharskys, Smirnovs, Bubnovs, those fifty top-ranking men, those two or three hundred second-tier activists of the highest calibre, formed a cultured, educated milieu, schooled in the Marxist method, driven by revolutionary zeal, profoundly honest—a success that is almost unique in history. Intellects and characters were strengthened, developed through this contact. (Stress: that the intellect is as much social as bio-psychological, and again the psychological is social by definition: or Beethoven in a village in the Auvergne, among the deaf, Einstein among the illiterate, Trotsky in Coyoacán during the worldwide reaction.) Juan Luis Velásquez brings him a poem, *Soledad de soledades*—and for several days, the Old Man reads it, has someone translate it for him word for

⁴ Trotsky had been assassinated fifteen months earlier. In 1946 Serge would co-author *The Life and Death of Leon Trotsky* with his widow, Natalia. Lev 'Liova' Sedov: Trotsky's son; died in Paris in 1938, most likely poisoned by the NKVD.

word . . . Solitude, one of the factors that hardened him. Terrible to be so strong, so great and so alone. (Our tragedy, for some of us.) Terrible and diminishing.

18 November 1941. We went into town, visited the Supreme Court to see Orozco's murals. A grey, square, characterless building. Inside, staircases, low vaults, courtyards, arches, the whole edifice rises out of the grey stone under crushing ceilings; it's nice. Joked: the cave of Justice. Brilliantly daring to put these powerful murals here; it is alive, it brings a breath of justice into the low geometric cavern. A passionate drawing in two colours, flame-red and grey. A plaster Justice, drunk or spineless, whose scales are broken, lording it over a heap of masked men, with death's-heads, drowning in paperwork, amid crumbling stones, in a scene of grisly chaos. The huge, red lightning bolt, a giant oblique flame, falls on the whole scene, another Justice-Revolution holds a formidable torch to the files. Another panel, the same magnificent lightning bolt, the same teeming low monsters doing dirty work, the same Justice-Revolution pursuing them this time with a sword. The symbolic figures of Quetzalcoatl, the flag used so that the red is flame-coloured, a huge half-alive death's-head melding into the ground. Admirably positioned above the grand staircase, a panel showing the red flag of the Mexican revolution mutilated and insulted. And at the very bottom, at the foot of the staircase, the open doorway reveals the life of the street, like a cinema screen. Art fertilized, right down to the architecture, by great mass movements. A direct connection between this art and the peasant wars, Zapata, Morelos. Revolutionary inspiration prevails over the betrayals and the disillusionments, art is at times its revenge.

5 December 1941. *Bolshevism as a tremendous human achievement.* The course of some sixty years had created a numerous revolutionary intelligentsia, constituting a unique achievement up till now in the modern world. Its general characteristics: a capacity for conviction, a unity of thought, action and life; personality, not individualism; social awareness, energy, capacity for sacrifice and hunger for victory. Superiority of the Bolsheviks: the Marxist weapon, superior intellectual training compared with the old idealisms. The Bolsheviks, however, are in no way essentially different from the Narodniki, the Mensheviks, the anarchists, maximalists or others. A shared ambiance which demonstrates the youthfulness and vigour of the Russian people at this moment in history: an era of scientific progress, the rise and optimism of the bourgeoisie, world war.

An extraordinary historical success, comparable to the birth of a man of genius: social birth.

Russian intelligentsia: mainly made up of intellectuals of bourgeois origin but supported by a much larger number of worker activists; take into consideration too the rural origins of the workers, their social health—little affected by the corruption and wearing effect of the big cities—and the provincial origin of the intellectuals, same quality; the religious background of both. The social function of religion in old Russia at the same time as its spiritual importance. The reaction–religion entanglement.

19 December 1941: *War in the Pacific*. Conversation with Vlady. Hong Kong fell in a matter of days. Singapore under threat. The British fleet of Singapore set sail without planes! The two biggest warships destroyed. Pearl Harbour is reportedly out of action, the Japanese fleet sailed a hundred miles out to sea, launched its bombers . . . Neither the intelligence services nor the American patrols had any inkling of what was coming and were caught off guard. Philippines probably lost, insufficient troops for a drawn-out resistance effort (10,000 American, 70,000 Filipino). It's possible that the Japanese will seize the Dutch Indies and even land in Australia, therefore win the war—initially. It'll be six months, a year, before the American air force will be ready to send powerful squadrons to Vladivostok, for example. A long war ahead.

1942

2 January 1942. André Breton. Entirely stylized. Personality that is a pure act, deliberately put on like make-up. For lack of a real personality. Always playing a part, for him the world is a stage. But if the actor is no more than his role, there is no longer an actor, there is nothing but a fictitious, false person. This is not higher reality or surreality, but unreality, insipidness.

None of his ideas stand up to a more probing critique that takes things seriously. As coherent as a well-constructed arabesque. Snippets of Marxism, astrology, Freudianism, Sade, *Nouvelle revue française* picked up at the flea market for hackneyed ideologies. The whole is no more than an attitude that is purely literary (the word 'literature' being taken not in the sense given to it by Dostoevsky or Lawrence of a direct, imperiously sincere expression of life, but in its NRF–Deux Magots sense:

a construct, a game, commerce, to impress). 'Automatic writing' using dictionaries: special effects, artificial automatisms, less revelation and spontaneity than in simple writing that is not intended to be automatic. A process used in the absence of spontaneity or a capacity for work rooted in self-confidence. (Since there is no self, nothing but an act.)

Remarkably decadent character.

Is there not, in this objective judgement (which I want to be objective) something profoundly unjust? Not to underrate André's perfect dignity, the strength of character (sometimes courage) evident in his stylization, even internal, his authentic bursts of poetry, a very sharp but uneven mind given to sudden flashes and capricious probing rather than a sustained effort; at times more profound than broad, more egotistical—in other words more preoccupied with his own importance than with true understanding. The stuff of a big, strong personality, but ruined in Paris, by this inter-war Paris, living on that literature of which Verlaine said 'all the rest is literature'.

Objective judgements are necessarily unjust at a certain point. (1) Because they can never be entirely objective (impersonal); (2) because they do not consider the person from the inside, identifying with them like a novelist or poet, and so unaware of essential factors, that can only be intuited, through empathy. (In this sense, empathy and love perhaps attain another objectivity, of a non-scientific kind, since it is not subject to precise verification, but higher, more profound, more alive. The difference between the truth of the work of art and that of the document.)

15 January 1942. Winter explains a great deal about the German retreat in Russia, and typhus. Not all: how come the Nazis weren't able to take Sebastopol, almost impossible to defend on the land side, in the Crimea where the winter is mild, like in Germany even? Hypothesis: Nazis on their last legs—close to defeat. Unlikely at present, premature (although running out of steam, for certain; not to that extent).

Or tacit or explicit agreement with Stalin: we won't advance any further, you won't attack Japan (Vladivostok, key position for bombing Japan's industrial centres). Matsuoka signs the Soviet–Japanese neutrality pact in April in Moscow, on his return from Berlin. At that point Hitler was already planning the offensive against Russia for June. Germany's declaration of war on the United States timed to coincide with Japan's attack shows that Germany and Japan were in league. Matsuoka played straight with Berlin and Berlin played straight with him: good orchestration.

On the 13th, in Kuibyshev, the Lozovski Declaration on normal relations with Japan and the renewal of the fisheries pact.

Mystery of the defence of Leningrad, surrounded, besieged, June the siege half lifted. Reasons: (1) impossibility of providing the city with supplies; (2) intention of seizing the fleet, the desire to create a competitive atmosphere.

4 April 1942. Stephan Zweig committed suicide in Rio at the end of March. I was in Veracruz, waiting for the *Nyassa* about whose fate grim rumours were circulating which I didn't take seriously (and yet it seemed inconceivable that Laurette was arriving). I read about it in a newspaper. Aged sixty; with his wife, some thirty years younger. Barbiturates. A magazine photo shows them lying in bed, asleep beside each other. On the bedside table, a glass, a bottle of mineral water, a box of matches; life's last trifling objects, practical, of no interest, of the kind we no longer see.

His latest book has just been published: *Brazil, Land of the Future* . . . I have no doubt he is sincere. Not the same future, a land, a man, a couple. His suicide note says he can no longer live like this, amid the collapse of a culture and a world, in reality a foreigner, as he must have felt in the Americas. Vaguely thought, more felt, Zweig was never a fighter, nothing but a great, refined intellectual, an artist—and ultimately feeble, feeble through being accustomed to comfort, through his idea of culture as something definitively acquired and of unique value, through being accustomed to literary success and the good life. I remember his home; it was the home of a hugely privileged patrician, on one of Salzburg's hills, in a most serene, romantic place, most beautiful to look at, one of the most civilized in the world . . .

I understood a lot about the nature of the man in admiring his house; he felt he was read in the name of Art. At the time fairly good on the psychology of emotions in the novel, easy success, but of good quality all the same. It all lacked fundamental vigour, humanism that was only skin deep and intellectually shallow, based on a superficial vision of the tragedy of today's world. Repression in the face of this tragedy; let me live with my noble thoughts, the psychologist and poet is entitled to this delightful house on the peaceful hillside, entitled to music, entitled to a privileged life, for his nobility enriches the world.

That intelligentsia is being torn up and crushed by the hurricane, it will only be able to rediscover its purpose in life by understanding the hurricane and flinging itself into it heart and soul. True, for a social category, impossible for most of those who comprise it. His end seems

logical and courageous. Nothing more natural than the dignified refusal to live in conditions that are unacceptable. Being uprooted, the void, age too with its declining faculties, the fear that one is not sufficiently alive to attain moments that are worth living for, the fear of physical deterioration. Above all the torpor of a mind that has lost its source of sustenance, the exchanges that stimulated it. Under the harsh Rio sun, it must have been particularly palpable: unbearable.

17 May 1942: *Henk Sneevliet*. Opening an American newspaper, I read that on 15 April, Sneevliet and eight of his comrades from the Dutch Revolutionary Socialist Party were sentenced to death by a Nazi military tribunal and executed.⁵ Our Spanish friends, accustomed to news of this kind, receive it with little emotion; they don't seem to realize that we have lost one of the best and most reliable of men. He must have been barely older than me, fifty-five maybe. We met in 1921, at the third Moscow Congress of the Comintern, without knowing each other; I told him in Amsterdam that in Moscow I had briefly glimpsed a certain Maring, delegate of the Dutch East Indies revolutionary party—'but that was me!' Deported during the war to the Dutch East Indies, where he had devoted himself to founding a local party (the Sarekat Islam?); became a man of the people, smitten with the inhabitants and the land. He spoke of them lovingly. 'The women, such beauty, such pureness of form, such sweet intelligence! And their flesh so delectable!' At the museum in The Hague, we stopped in front of the Malay gold artefacts brought back from a royal treasury, and his face turned livid with rage: 'Look at all that, looted by our bandits!' He told us about the seizing of a palace, the massacre. That was in 1936, some of his comrades from his youth were still serving life sentences on a prison island; he had not forgotten them, doing his best to write to them, and campaigning and protesting on their behalf.

Each time he came to Paris to see me at Pré-Saint-Gervais, he would bring me a tribute from our Amsterdam friends, half a cheese, a dozen cigars. Boulevard Montparnasse, in the evening, I can picture him suddenly emerging from the stream of passers-by; long overcoat, a little soft hat made of dark green fabric pulled down over his ageing face, his features wrinkled, with an expression of stubbornness and vigorous, sad

⁵ Henk Sneevliet (1883–1942): Dutch Marxist, played an important role in the early history of Chinese and Indonesian communism; broke with the Comintern in 1927 to form his own party; elected to Dutch parliament in 1930s; organized working-class resistance to German occupation; executed in 1942.

intensity; gold-framed spectacles. He saw the war coming very clearly and the inevitable crushing of Holland; also spoke of the Dutch bourgeoisie's increasingly fascistic leanings. 'Socialism will only have a future afterwards . . .' Like me, he loved and admired Leon Trotsky, but our feelings were mixed with annoyance, a growing mutiny against his authoritarian ways. 'Without understanding anything of our situation, the Old Man wants to dictate to us. He encourages three or four blinkered fanatics from Rotterdam who bang out theories on a typewriter to split the party; it is pathetic and stupid . . .' We were in agreement that you can't found a new International without first of all having two or three real parties or groups in two or three important countries, and that you can't found anything on a single head, with 'Bolshevism-Leninism' becoming increasingly unintelligible to people in the West.

During the invasion of Belgium, he was stranded in Antwerp, wrote to ask me to get hold of a French visa for him—but there was no one left to speak to. I imagine him going to his execution with his customary composure, his scowling face like that of a wise, pensive bulldog.

10 July 1942: *War in Russia*. The Russian front breached between Kursk and Kharkov; in eight days, direct threat to Stalingrad, Ryazan-Moscow and Rostov, the Black Earth region and the harvest lost. Collapse of the front. Probability that the USSR will effectively be out of action for the autumn, cut off from the Caucasus.

Three weeks ago, I had a long conversation with Max Diamant.⁶ His theories: that the USSR is infinitely stronger than people believe; that Stalin will maintain the prestige of victory; but that Stalinism will adapt and become less brutal. Conclusion: adjust to this prospect, strike a compromise with the Stalinists. A few days ago, Julián criticized me for having underestimated Stalinism's strength and vitality.⁷

I replied to Max D that we had no idea what was happening in the USSR; that based on the little we knew and my long experience, the domestic situation must be tragically indescribable; that defeat was likely and that

⁶ Max Diamant (1908–1992): German socialist, member of Sozialistische Arbeiterpartei Deutschlands; head of IG Metall's foreign-worker section, 1962–73.

⁷ Julián Gorkín (1901–1987): leading POUM member, editor of its newspaper *La Batalla*; imprisoned after banning of the POUM, escaped from Barcelona before it fell to Franco in 1939 and travelled to Mexico; helped Serge obtain a Mexican visa in 1941; co-author—with Serge, Marceau Pivert and Paul Chevalier—of *Los problemas del socialismo en nuestro tiempo* (1944); returned to Paris in 1948, later worked for the Congress for Cultural Freedom and edited its Latin American journal, *Cuadernos del Congreso por la Libertad de la Cultura*, from 1953.

it was a matter of knowing how far it could be contained (I don't think the Nazis are capable of reaching Transcaucasia and seriously threatening the Urals this year); that Stalin will remain the mastermind of the defeat and that one way or another his regime will probably collapse.

11 November 1942: *Days of the Dead*. During the days of the Dead that followed the assassination of Trotsky, they were selling *calaveras* in the street resembling him and also little cardboard coffins containing a dead Trotsky made of sugar. Jeannine's repugnance at seeing children eat the *calaveras*.⁸ Already European, her slightly horrified protests. It didn't last; she soon found out that it was good sugar all the same.

14 November 1942. Chapter Four of my novel being read at Les éditions de la Maison de France in New York has been lost.⁹ It is the chapter that was meant to be stolen: that of the confessions. It is probably in a drawer in the Kremlin. I talk to Natalia [Sedova] who tells me about the case of a comrade Brown (or Braun) of Los Angeles, who was working on a biography of the Old Man. A trusted Japanese servant, in their employment for twelve years, left, taking with him all the manuscripts.

1943

1–3 January 1943. Taxco, by automobile, with Martínez. Over two hundred kilometres by road, heading for the Pacific, across vast mountainous landscapes under a scorching sun. This volcanic terrain, violently distorted, perpetually opens up new horizons of jagged crests against soft, luminous skies. The rocks were shattered from every direction during the era of geological revolutions. Aridity, few crops, the impression of a country with no population, taken over by thorny plants, magnificent agaves with huge drooping leaves in the shape of bowls, *órganos* shooting up to a height of five metres or more, tremendous perpendicular cactus tree-bushes of a green so dark that they look almost black. There are patches of silver-hued stony wilderness. Nearing Taxco, the horizon bisected by a semi-circular gap in the wall of mountain.

The town is built on terraces on steep slopes, with astonishing little horizontal squares. Winding narrow streets paved with pointed gravel stones, walking up or down them requires some agility. Decay and good

⁸ Jeannine Kibalchich (b. 1935): Serge's daughter.

⁹ The novel was *The Case of Comrade Tulayev*.

hotels for *gringos*, shops selling silverware and jewellery—the mines are nearby—owned by foreigners, of course. Above the small, teeming market rise the tall, dark-pink towers of the noble baroque-style church, richly ornamented façade, the stone bursting with life. Shady square, kiosk, benches, *muchachas* and *muchachos*. At the entrance to the square, below the church and a smart hotel, a steep path leads up to the most pleasant prison in the world. ‘Do come in!’ they say to us. The guard-house-cum-office is at the front, overlooking the little street; the back of the room comprises carved wooden bars looking onto cool whiteness. There the prisoners regally parade, smoking and wearing sombreros. A splendid young man, of pure Indian stock, draped in an immaculate white *serape*, offers us through the bars a prettily coloured woven straw basket that he has just finished . . . Bargaining, cigarettes. We wonder whether it’s not a tourist prison?

The town dates from the early Middle Ages. Peasant figures reminiscent of Brueghel. Steep slope: above a *pulquería* a coffin-seller leaves his door wide open revealing a crudely-lit interior dominated by a beautiful white coffin lined with pink padding, waiting for a young Catholic girl. Another coffin-seller displays—or rather piles up—the coffins for children.

On the highway with buses thundering past, a drunken *Indio* has fallen asleep—utterly alone. The buses drive around him.

Return: hours of gleaming road to the snow-covered Ixta and Popo¹⁰ gilded by sunlight, a vast, peaceful landscape where the peaks glisten like the picture postcards of Fujiyama. Battle of a huge horizontal cloud that has crashed into the Popo and morphs from an angel into a monster.

11 January 1943. Note the effect of Europe’s silence. For years the great intellectual laboratories of Europe which led the world, boldly providing it with new spiritual sustenance each year—often loathsome, but *new!*—have stopped producing ideas, works, men and fashions for the world. Moscow fell silent first, under the boots of Thermidor: Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Gorky have become as impossible as Pilniak, Meyerhold, Eisenstein. Then Germany fell silent and lastly France. Moscow, Rome, Berlin, Paris, Vienna, Madrid, have not produced a single book, a single new name for nearly five years. And most of the great names of the past have gradually been suppressed. A general decline in culture, the effects of which must be strongly felt in the United States and Latin America.

¹⁰ The volcanoes Popocatepetl and Ixtaccíhuatl.

The émigré intellectuals are crippled and, if they have any revolutionary energy, are quasi plague victims, almost completely boycotted. I speak from experience.

22 February 1943: *Earthquake*. For me it all started with a dream, curious for the intense memory it left behind (I usually forget my dreams) and the need I felt to tell Laurette and Fritz Fränkel about it.¹¹ On Thursday, I think it was, I dreamed that I was in a woodland, by an asphalted avenue down which a procession was passing—had just passed (I can no longer see the procession, but I have an impression of white clothes). Hot, sunny, Mexican weather. Opposite me, on the other side of the road, was a beautiful, twisted tree with strong branches against a background of leaves and, beyond that, a tall, rectangular building under construction, taller than it was wide, with large sections gaping open and full of ant-like people; grey concrete structure. Suddenly I felt dizzy and slightly sick, I put my hand out for something to lean on, but I saw the tree opposite tremble with a rippling movement and I understood it was an earthquake; then the tall skyscraper gently split in two and the top half began to collapse; inside the ant-people were running about in panic. I thought of Laurette and Jeannine and went home; nothing had happened to them.

On Saturday evening the maid, Esperanza, told me that when she was in the garden with Jeannine she had felt an earthquake, *un temblor*—the trees were shaking back and forth—at around 6 o'clock. A lot of people noticed it. Working at home, I hadn't been aware of anything. Yesterday, Sunday morning, on Avenida Insurgentes, I saw a tall grey house, brand new, with its rear section split in two like a building made of cardboard; firemen were rushing around in the rubble below, a Green Cross ambulance was waiting. The house had collapsed in the night, after the quake (one young Catalan woman killed, her children and husband badly injured, Calle de Coahuila 221). It was exactly the same grey colour as the house in my dream, the storeys bisected and gaping open; I saw an iron bedstead still standing in a yellow bedroom.

Half an hour later, in the tram with Fritz Fränkel, we talked about earthquakes. I told him what I'd seen and my dream. He told me the

¹¹ Fritz Fränkel (1892–1944): German doctor and psychoanalyst, founding member of the KPD; medical officer with the International Brigades in Spain; broke with the party in 1937, came to Mexico in 1941 and became one of Serge's closest friends, working with the Socialismo y Libertad group.

dream must have some symbolic meaning. I replied that it was very possible and that in my writing I had often used the word *séisme* to describe major events; that in my last novel I had a character who was a seismology expert. At the time I didn't remember that the title of the novel is *The Earth Began to Tremble* . . . and perhaps that is strange: a repression in the strict sense.¹² I added that I always love to contemplate the starry sky, for me it's a pleasure and a need, but I never look at it without expecting some cosmic event or catastrophe: as though a star were about to expand and burst—as though an enormous sun would suddenly appear and fill the night with fire—the feeling within me that this would be natural, that the calm serenity of the sky and the immobility of the constellations are not natural, or at any rate not definitive. Fritz made no comment. (I note that I've almost never told anyone this; I think I've only said it—in passing—to Laurette.)

In the afternoon, after the meeting at the Ibero-Mexican centre, I read with interest that a small volcano has just started to erupt in Parangaricutiro, Michoacán; the inhabitants of several *pueblos* are evacuating. The village priest refused to leave his church, which contains a miraculous figure of Christ. On the other hand, an old man of 107 left on foot. A photo shows his fine, animated features.

28 February 1943. Jeannine's birthday. Finished the *Memoirs*, I shall probably call the French edition *Souvenirs des mondes disparus*.¹³ What is left of the worlds I've known, in which I've struggled? France before the First War, the war, the victory, Spain, where the revolutionary yeast was so powerfully fermenting, the Europe of 'the birth of our power', Russia of the great epic years, Europe of complete hope, Germany and Austria of hesitant watersheds, Russia of Thermidor, West of the Popular Fronts? Nothing of these worlds will be reborn, we are hurtling towards newness, through disasters, towards unforeseeable rebirths or long twilights that now and then will resemble rebirths. And so many dead behind me on all these paths! Three or four generations of comrades.

With the book finished, I've come to a dead end. Is it publishable? It's dense and hard to read, because I wanted to make it a precise, considered testimony, not an emotional story of the adventures of the Ego, which would have been required for a best-seller. But that is not the problem:

¹² *The Earth Began to Tremble* was the original title of *The Case of Comrade Tulayev*.

¹³ Serge's autobiography was published by Editions du Seuil in 1951 with the title *Mémoires d'un révolutionnaire*, although it appeared in Spanish as *Memorias de mundos desaparecidos*.

it mercilessly, objectively indicts the Stalinist regime; it accuses it still more than my novel, judged unpublishable 'at present' in New York due to an 'unwritten law', as a publisher put it, that bans any criticism of despotism in Russia, 'our ally'.¹⁴ So the more intense, rich and irrefutable a book is and the more closely it touches on the wound from which the world is suffering, the fewer its chances of being published. This will change no doubt, and maybe soon, but how can we live counting on this 'soon' that may contain an epoch, when every six months brings a heavy burden of rent and daily bread?

If I were younger—had more muscular strength—I would wait and meanwhile do anything to earn a crust. But all I've got left is a brain, which no one needs at the moment and many would rather pierce with one final little bullet.

13 April 1943: *Stalin's Mission*. We had just come out of a cinema with Jean and Galy Malaquais.¹⁵ Night almost suffocating. Malaquais told me he's started a novel on 'the desertion of the revolutionaries'. I felt like answering that he's not enough of a revolutionary himself to write on that subject, which is wrong anyway; that with his propensity for describing man in terms of baseness, he runs the risk of producing a very bad book, inventing desertions and problems that reality does not have to offer.

I say: we've had an enormous number die, but no deserters. Those who leave, after struggles, are those floating on the tide who were never revolutionaries.

Malaquais: What about Zinoviev, Radek and the rest?

Me: But they remained faithful to the revolution and the party on the road to destruction, until the last minute. They ended up covered in mud and got themselves shot so as to carry on being useful, in spite of everything. What they lacked was a clear political grasp of the tragedy they were part of. The courage to see with merciless clarity. The courage of the mother who thinks, 'I've given birth to a monster'. We can criticize them for a—crucial—error of judgement, but nothing more.

Malaquais: And Stalin, you don't think he's a traitor? Massacring Lenin's party, turning the Russian Revolution into what it has become, isn't that betrayal?

¹⁴ *L'Affaire Toulaev* was first published by Editions du Seuil in 1948.

¹⁵ Jean Malaquais (1908–1998): Polish-born novelist, author of *Les Javanais*; married to Russian artist Galy Yurkevich.

Me: In polemical terms perhaps. But I don't like polemical terms that do violence to the truth. In my prohibited novel I think I've created a psychologically accurate portrait of Stalin.¹⁶ He hasn't betrayed, he has changed and history has moved on; and he carries the heavy burden of a mediocre, powerful personality. He believes in his mission: he has imagined himself the saviour of a revolution threatened by ideologues, idealists, the unrealistic (remember Napoleon's scorn for ideologues). He has fought against them as best he can, with his inferiority complex, his jealousies and terrors concerning men who were superior to him and whom he could not understand. As the saviour he has brushed them out of his path by the only means at his disposal—terror and lies, the methods of a blinkered intelligence governed by suspicion and placed at the service of a powerful vitality.

He made himself, and circumstances made him the leader, the symbol, of a vast new formation of revolutionary parvenus—stubborn, hard, utterly unscrupulous, clinging to power, living in anxiety and panic, but with a huge sense of their own power and claiming to embody the victorious revolution. In fact they embodied a new phenomenon that socialist theory had not foreseen: the totalitarian economic state, with a culture too weak to support individual freedom and thus condemned to guided thought. Guided thought means both absolute, material self-confidence and fear of oneself, awareness of one's own weakness. Stalin has built this totalitarian system, he has served it and he will not betray it; it's the only system with which he can be identified.

31 August 1943. Surrealist evening. Pierre Mabille, baggy jacket, more than stout, big, round head, eyes of a greenish grey, also big and round, licks his fingers as he savours an excellent bœuf bourguignon.¹⁷ Michette, stout, wearing trousers, eyes of the same colour, a compact, regular face with hard little features. Leonora Carrington, who has been told she looks like Charles I in the portrait by Van Dyck, and it's true, but in a feminine, bland, hard, mad version.¹⁸ She has a fine, very long face with a square forehead, pale and symmetrical, a slightly snub nose, dark, intensely

¹⁶ *The Case of Comrade Tulayev*.

¹⁷ Pierre Mabille (1904–1952): French doctor, philosopher and anthropologist, close to the Surrealists; Serge had met him in 1941 en route to Mexico, where Mabille arrived in 1943.

¹⁸ Leonora Carrington (1917–2011): English-born painter and writer, arrived in Mexico from Europe in 1942; had had a nervous breakdown in 1939 after her then partner, Max Ernst, was interned by the French authorities.

burning eyes, full of assurance and disquiet—manifestly schizophrenic. Thin, an abundance of black hair. She does crazy drawings in gouache, fragments of landscape floating on islands, women's garments hanging in the sky or in empty space, flayed animals, hands scattered here and there, figures from nightmares and dreams drawn in fine pen amid leafy greens and yellows and light greens; the whole larded with tiny, long pieces of writing in which I read only that the universe is the result of couplings of nothing. One of the drawings, on the wall, is moreover upside down, and we all agree that it should be turned once a fortnight.

Her husband Renato Leduc, journalist, a big greying Mexican. Benjamin Péret, pale, pink and grey, face like one of Voltaire's eighteenth-century *abbés* with a gothic profile. Remedios Varo, almost no flesh at all, a gothic face too but very asymmetrical, Esteban Francés, air of a good-looking young Mediterranean who smiles as he admires himself and expects to succeed with women, his agreeable, meaningless, smooth talk. And then the Wolfes, pleasantly average—and myself.¹⁹

Pierre Mabille leads the fun and games. The game of Prophecy on the end of the war, the future of Surrealism. [Kurt] Seligman and others, yesterday, gave dates, right down to the exact time of the armistice, etc.²⁰ Seligman was said to have predicted the date and time that Germany went to war against Russia, with an error of a few days for the date, but the precise time, and eighteen months in advance. I replied, the armistice, if there is just one rather than several, between 1944 and 1945; climax of the European revolution in 1948; that's when we meet again in Paris in disappointing but thrilling circumstances. In two years Surrealism will be a rather enriching echo of former times.

The answers on the future of Surrealism are revelations. Three stars: Breton, Péret, Mabille. A centre will form in Mexico, and its light will shine across the world, Surrealism will be transformed. It will play a role in the European revolution. On display the naked pride of an inner circle that takes itself very seriously but still remains unsure of its own position. Plenty of infantilism in it, the narrow, even egocentric culture of a group concerned primarily with filling the emptiness of life by admiring itself, something unhealthy in endlessly and enjoyably brushing with

¹⁹ Benjamin Péret (1899–1959): Surrealist poet, member of the PCF before joining the International Workers Party. Remedios Varo (1908–1963): Spanish-born painter and anarchist, married to Péret. Esteban Francés (1913–1976): Catalan painter. Bertram D. Wolfe (1896–1977): US writer and former communist, supporter of 'International Right Opposition' in 1930s.

²⁰ Kurt Seligman (1900–1962): Swiss painter and engraver.

mystery, sexuality, madness—all in all the atmosphere of a literary café in Paris, interesting, blinkered and decaying.

1944

5 *January 1944*. Men seem to need a sense of history comparable to the sense of direction of migrating birds. A metaphor more amusing than useful: it's an aspect of consciousness, very different from instinct, that we have been acquiring since the Encyclopaedists. Before that, great ministers had it and that's what made them great—great Jesuits, someone like Bossuet (more eloquently than intelligently) or Vico. With Hegel and Marx the vision of history suddenly acquires a kind of plenitude; with Marx it is overlaid by a desire for dynamic, objective, impassioned action, and we might wonder whether the enormous spiritual magnetism of Marx's work cannot be explained to a considerable extent by its revelation of a *historical sense*. (Certainly the conception—myth, in Sorel's terms—of the 'historical mission of the proletariat' was in reality the burning flame of Marxism, and it is this flame that rises so high with the Russian Revolution.) In this regard compare the fertile power of Marx with the healthy, sometimes vigorous mediocrity of historians of the French Revolution such as Thiers, Guizot and Louis Blanc, who ultimately made the same discoveries in historical methodology as Marx, but without passion, without dynamic action, all in all as desk-bound men for whom history is a scholarly autopsy rather than the study of a living continuity.

9 *August 1944*. Dark times. Read today:

- A dispatch from Istanbul saying that a Turkish ship carrying 296 Romanian Jewish refugees has been sunk in the Black Sea, half a dozen people were rescued.

- Another dispatch on the lack of water and food shortages in Florence, an open city around which there is fighting.

- Notes on the nightmare in London, bombed by rocket-planes; it's an absurd massacre, and people are getting used to living there.

- An article by Léon Dennen on the extermination of the Jews of Hungary—hundreds of thousands of Jews—by means of asphyxiation wagons in a camp in Upper Silesia. The Nazi army travels with *Judenvernichtung Abteil* [Jew-extermination wagons], which function like efficient administrations.

– An American journalist’s account of the collective suicide of the Japanese population of the island of Saipan, occupied by the Americans. An officer was seen decapitating his last remaining soldiers then running at a tank, sword in hand; girls doing their hair and washing before throwing themselves into the sea; entire families performing their ablutions before drowning themselves.

– An official report on the execution by hanging of eight German generals rightly or wrongly implicated in the recent ‘conspiracy’ against the Führer. (I know how conspiracies of this sort are fabricated.)

– American research reports on the famine in China and the variety of deaths by starvation.

Saw, almost without emotion, snapshots of the ruins of old churches in Russia and Italy; Cherbourg prostitutes with shaved heads; French collaborators hunted down in the streets and begging for mercy on their knees.

We have reached the level of the dark times of the early Middle Ages. The need to reflect on this. The extreme difficulty of reflecting on it.

13 September 1944. Second meeting of the Commission of independent socialists to study the political document drafted by Marceau Pivert, Gironella and Wilebaldo Solano.²¹ It is a kind of rudimentary *Communist Manifesto*, rehashing all the old phrases of that genre. I criticize it harshly—thinking that texts of this sort can do nothing but discredit the handful of men who take responsibility for them. They listen to me with interest and silent resentment. I say that we cannot improvise such documents today, as all terms, all ideas are being subject to revision in face of new realities, in the midst of a raging tempest. A confused and rather painful discussion. In passing, I said that the Workers’ and Peasants’ Socialist Party (PSOP) dissolved at the beginning of the war; Marceau Pivert, visibly irate, insists that it ‘exists and is a force’ and declares himself better informed than I, he who left France before the war. I argue that it is false to write that the working class, in bourgeois democracies, has

²¹ Marceau Pivert (1895–1958): leader of the SFIO’s left-wing current during Popular Front era; broke with SFIO to form Workers’ and Peasants’ Socialist Party (PSOP) in 1938; spent war years in Mexico, returned to France in 1946 and rejoined SFIO after dissolution of PSOP; argued for ‘Third Camp’ position as Cold War began; supported Algerian independence. Enrique Gironella (1908–1987): POUM militant, Commissar for the Catalan Generalitat in 1936, interned for his part in the May Events of 1937; escaped to France, then Mexico. Wilebaldo Solano (1916–2010): POUM leader, active in French resistance; author of *El POUM en la historia* (1999).

only its chains to lose; that it enjoys—formerly enjoyed, in Europe—a real well-being and meaningful freedoms. Pivert speaks of mass malnutrition in France before the war! I say that the state has changed its nature and is no longer the armed body of one class for the domination of another, as Engels had it, with the exception of the totalitarian regimes; the modern state is also the organization of communications, of schools, of public health, etc. Indignation of Pivert, Gironella, Jean Malaquais: for a moment, I sense that they might cry treason!

I point out dim-witted naiveties in the text like ‘the complete organization of the world’; comical incoherences such as the affirmation of the ‘full sovereignty’ of all the colonial peoples, the rejection of ‘any hypocritical notion of guardianship towards them’, and the suggestion of providing them with ‘economic, moral and military aid’. They do not say much in response but I can see that I offended those sentiments which can only express themselves in this poor phraseology. (My thesis: that the emancipation of the colonial peoples can only be the result of a close collaboration with the industrial nations—the metropolises—socially reorganized, marching towards greater justice and humanity . . . greeted coldly without discussion). Narcís Molins i Fabregàs says that ‘we want to get down to action’ and not merely to ‘engage in discussions that are academic even if very interesting.’²² What action, if not that of the typewriter; and ideas, accurate views, are they not also in a certain sense actions?

Malaquais finally reproaches me for not speaking of ‘the proletariat and the dictatorship of the proletariat!’ (When did he ever speak of it himself? Another story.) At one point in the discussion, I felt exactly as I did in a Russian party cell in 1927, when we refuted, against all the clamour, the already blood-stained stupidities of ‘socialism in one country’ and denounced the Thermidor that was then unfolding. This is how we debated, I said: ‘I say that this is a white saucer, I didn’t say that it was a blue saucer or a black carafe, I said that it was a white saucer!’ Bukharin, at this time, recommended putting everything in writing—and not to entrust the paper to the opponent! The psychological phenomenon of the Politburo repeats itself *ad infinitum*. At root: idealists caught by the sclerosis of doctrines, of circumstances, and dominated by their convictions and their emotional attachments, in short by fanaticism. In such conditions, those who trouble the inner security of others appear as

²² Narcís Molins i Fabregàs (1901–1962): Catalan journalist, writer and militant; member of POUM executive during the Civil War; remained in Mexico and in the 1950s undertook a study of Aztec tax regimes.

loathsome heretics. Molins i Fabregàs, Gorkín, Pivert reproach me for putting in doubt convictions which they do not doubt themselves, hence their feeling of superiority.

The core of the debate, independent of the poor quality of the proposed text:

Their extremely optimistic and schematic conviction is that the Russian Revolution is going to repeat itself shortly in Europe. ‘The workers will occupy the factories’ (Pivert), they will take power (Gironella), then the European revolution will form a socialist Federation. New cadres will form themselves everywhere, the underground resistance movements already show the power of the masses. The Spaniards think they will be in Spain in six months and at the head of great movements. Pivert: ‘The PSOP continues!’ and he takes out a newspaper clipping which reports that the Lyons comrades’ underground paper has called for ‘the formation of a red army’ in France, which is the height of absurdity: to do such a thing when powerless, at the risk of one’s life, is to play into the hands of the reactionaries and the Stalinists.

My theses: that this war differs profoundly from that of 1914–18, of which it is the successor, and that it notably involves aspects of an international civil war (strong objections from Pivert). That the economic structure of the world has changed, traditional capitalism giving way to a planned economy, thus with a collectivist bent, which could be that of monopolies, of totalitarian parties—or of democracies of a new type, if they succeeded in coming into being (strong objections from Pivert). That the defeats of European socialism are not solely attributable to the inadequacy of leaders, although that is of some significance, but can be better explained in terms of the decline of the working class and of socialism as a result of modern technology—chronic unemployment, declassing of the jobless, tremendous increase in the productive capacity of machines, with less human labour required; greater influence of technicians. (Pivert rejects the entirety of these views without attempting to refute them; to speak of the weakening of the working class as a class appears sacrilegious to all; what can I do if it is the truth? A good Old Bolshevik, one of those who expelled and imprisoned us only to go before the firing squads themselves, would have given me this answer: there is no truth that can prevail over the interests of the party.)

That we are being carried along by the current of an immense revolution, but that the Russian Revolution will not repeat itself except in episodes of secondary importance. That socialism must renounce all ideas of dictatorship and of working-class hegemony and make itself the

representative of the great masses among whom a socialistic consciousness is germinating, obscure and without doctrinal jargon. That the essential thing for the immediate future will be the restoration of traditional democratic rights, precondition for the rebirth of the workers' and socialist movement; that we must try to break out of the void we are now in, to seek out the support and sympathy of the democratic masses wherever they are, make ourselves understood by them, bring our ideas up to date. That Stalinism, which has formed and nurtured armed resistance movements in France, Yugoslavia, Greece and elsewhere, constitutes the worst danger, the mortal danger that we would be crazy to claim we can face alone. That the years to come will be ones of confused struggles in which the socialist movement can do no more than re-establish itself—if it does not commit suicide through insurrectional demagoguery. That it should seek influence on the terrain of democracy, in the Constituent Assemblies and elsewhere, accepting compromise in an intransigent spirit. That if the socialist left mires itself in an extremism bereft of influence, with a language barely intelligible to people and an outdated ideology dating from 1920, the Stalinists will confect a fake socialism, subtle and without scruple, which might very well prevail.

No matter what I say, agreement is impossible, and the discussion difficult and sterile. Those who possess inner flexibility will change under the cudgel-blows of events; the others will vegetate in groupuscules on the margins of life (which offers many satisfactions) or will be crushed.

12 November 1944. Read the *Black Book Of Polish Jewry*—horrifying.²³ A hundred times over, with variations on expertly organized sadism and bestiality, the same tale of violence, violation and ultimately rational extermination in factories designed for the purpose. For the Jews of Russia that must come to around three million murdered—at least—an entire people. It is beyond imagination, lucidity falters. Hard to think straight.

There is absolute mystery surrounding the extermination camps, asphyxiation wagons, gas chambers, etc. Probably the people chosen to carry out their grisly work were subsequently themselves destroyed; either those performing these tasks become half-mad and visibly dangerous, or the system provides for such witnesses to disappear. The propaganda, in print and illustrations, largely focuses on the humiliation of the victims. Newspaper photos: elderly rabbis bent double

²³ Jacob Apenszlak, ed., *Black Book of Polish Jewry*, New York 1943.

digging the ground, guarded by young thugs with guns. It's a necessary psychological preparation for the crime. No doubt the Nazis found thousands of keen underlings, complicity on a large scale. Does it tarnish the German people with responsibility? It is impossible not to think so, not to want to think so, by instinctive reaction; such a reaction is legitimate because natural. But the reality?

In reality, the system appealed to destructive instincts, to sadism, to the castration complex, to select a few thousand brutes for all the work: not hard to find a hundred thousand among sixty-five million inhabitants, and those hundred thousand were more than enough for all the tasks. Moreover, the totalitarian machinery (inconceivable to anyone who has not experienced it) gives no choice to the average man, who is neither good nor bad and tends to be sociable, moulded by one or two thousand years of civilization. Sent to Poland, in uniform, placed on watch not far from an extermination factory, the average man can resist only through suicide, suicide as revolt, a last reserve of conscience (which translates into a neurotic, sometimes explosive passivity). Herbert Lenhoff tells me that escape can also be sought through exalted acceptance, a fanatical consent, involving the sacrifice of the best of oneself and deliberate blindness.²⁴ (Imagine Lord Vansittart in a totalitarian uniform and designated by his superiors to join a *Judenvernichtung* brigade.)

The attitude of the Jews themselves, in whom social consciousness is particularly acute. In the ghettos and camps, the auxiliary service was and is carried out by Jews, chosen from the fittest and exterminated after working for some time. They know this, but they gain a few days or weeks of infernal respite. Some of them, having accepted their 'work', subsequently come asking to be shot—and an SS man blows their brains out. In the meantime they are allowed to eat the food brought by the herd who are asphyxiated, electrocuted or gunned down. The last meal matters to the starving, condemned, human animal. Here no censure is permissible from those who are well nourished and not condemned.

1945

Ajijic, 12 January 1945. Abstract art makes a vigorous appearance on the eve of the First World War, at a time of new advances in technology, of industrial rationalization, of the first economic planning (Russia). This

²⁴ Herbert Lenhoff: Jewish doctor and psychoanalyst, exiled in Mexico; went to New York in 1945; a principal correspondent of Serge in the last two years of his life.

situates it. Its sources: 1. the machine; 2. scientific abstraction (tied to technology); 3. the spirit of destruction. It is a destructive art.

1. Consider the new human environment created by the development of mechanization. The fine pages by Spengler on the modern city and the capital sense of alienation to which it gives rise. 'Men experience themselves solely as objects of opaque processes and, torn between sudden shock and sudden forgetfulness, are no longer capable of a sense of temporal continuity' (summary by T. W. Adorno, *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science*).²⁵ Man in the city of machines, leading a mechanized and helpless life that has been rationalized by technology, experiences a disaffection, bears a grudge against both Nature and his own nature. He tends to compensate for this obscure and powerful feeling by giving himself the sense of superiority and abstract vision of the ideal robot. (Stupid ingenuity of the American-made 'Superman'.) Anatole France's insight at the end of *L'Île des Pingouins*: the giant city and the man who dreams of blowing up the Earth. In Duchamp's *Bride and her Seven Bachelors*, note the poor imitation of a child's drawing of a machine. The work of Mondrian, which limits itself to combining black lines on a white background with an occasional rectangle shaded with one of the six basic colours. Nothing but grids, numerous variations on the theme of prison bars. Compare the empty dryness of Mondrian with the prison bars in Raphael's vision in the *Deliverance of St Peter*. Mondrian hits rock bottom: the disappearance of art. (Kandinsky doesn't belong entirely to abstract art: concrete density of his visions, impressionist character of his painting.)

2. Abstraction is one of the greatest discoveries of the intellect. The human genius distinguishes between the orange and the colour of the orange. From concrete reality it moves to the general idea of colour, the quality of colour. Seductiveness and fecundity of the procedure. (The *realism* of the Middle Ages.) Power of higher mathematics in the modern world. Penetration of the methods of scientific-technical thought into the whole of mental life, even into sensibility. Its effects: enrichment of the intellect by an increase in the number of *signs* available; economy of symbolic thought; destruction or disintegration of old, concrete notions; (bitter) fading of love for reality—concrete reality, the only kind. (Note on this score that Surrealism—proceeding from psychological sur-reality—is in contradiction with abstract art; but agrees with it on the psychological importance of the abstract.)

²⁵ Reference to Adorno's article 'Spengler Today', *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science*, 9, 1941; reprinted in *Prisms*, Cambridge, MA 1981, p. 55.

The civilizations that preceded machinism did not go beyond hieraticism and symbolism—didn't arrive at the destruction of being by abstraction. Interior captivity of man in the age of the Machine.

3. Substitution of the sign for the object (for being), no longer a comfortable convention, becomes destruction of the object (of being)—or conjures it away. By separating the colour from the orange, I disembodiment the colour, which does not exist apart from the orange, and begin the destruction of the orange itself. By inventing a fantastical geometry of and perspective on the human face, Picasso destroys it. Gordon Onslow Ford's phrase: 'He discovered various ways of destroying the human form.'²⁶

Abstraction as a loss of contact with reality. A domination of the intellect by signs: vision and understanding are now no more than a play of signs. And this implies an abdication of the intellect, since it renounces immediate, intuitive, carnal contact with things and beings. To be restored: the full notion of a living intellect, inseparable from the whole human being and thus from the whole of nature, in its concreteness.

4. What is lost in the process: the affective relation between the artist and the real, the love of nature and of being. The Sistine Chapel fresco expresses Michelangelo's love for the human body. Visionary mentality of Benvenuto Cellini: he sees Death, the angels—not signs and symbols. He's a fanatic for reality.

5. Dual influence, in the relative success of abstract art, of snobbery and sincere nihilism (hopelessness). Influence of technical art: photography which discourages people from drawing or painting (wrongly, by making the problem too difficult). Facility and commonplaces of abstraction. The path of least resistance. What do Picasso's 'portraits' of Dora Maar express? By contrast, the enormous power of expression of Manet's *Clemenceau* in the Louvre, and of certain portraits by David. Reduction of the artwork to elementary ornamentalism: in Russia, Puni; in the West, Joan Miró.

1 May 1945. It's a beautiful, hot Mexico City evening, an evening rich with plant life. The Italian grocer who serves me some cheese looks sidelong at me, with the round eye of an alarmed bird. It's the first time I've seen him, and I sense that he's judging me. 'Have you seen this?', he says. 'This' is a newspaper headline: 'Mussolini shot'. I read the news,

²⁶ Gordon Onslow Ford (1912–2003): English Surrealist painter and sculptor, emigrated to Mexico in 1941, where he and his wife set up the magazine *Dyn*; Serge befriended the couple, who lived in Erongarícuaro, by Lake Pátzcuaro.

surprised that Nemesis has finally struck where it should have, blindly, justly. The Duce, his mistress, fifteen or so members of the last fascist government, shot. I've spent so long hearing constantly about the executions of straight and honest men who only wanted a better future, a nobler life, that the punishment of the executioners shocks me as something I could no longer have believed in. But I believe in it all the same, and I even remember having written once, on the subject of fascism: 'We know how the parades will end!' A journalist describes fifteen corpses lined up in a hangar; he lists the names of ministers, members of the Grand Council, chiefs of police. I recognize one of the names of the men in the *fascio's* last team. For a moment, the naked corpse appears before me on the grocer's counter. Did he still have his fine, long beard with its double point, now turned white? Was he still bony, as I had known him, with a lively, cheerful look in his eye, an optimist with a combative voice and way of speaking? The Italian papers have labelled Nicola Bombacci the 'Arch-Traitor'.²⁷ Pitiful naked corpse of the arch-traitor! Is there, then, a highest degree of treason?

In 1921, we attended the big revolutionary celebrations in Petrograd together. Nicola Bombacci was in one of the first delegations sent by the Italian Socialist Party to the Russian Revolution. Cheerful, fraternal, a fine speaker, with a direct intelligence that was a stranger to intellectualism. He wanted nothing more, it seemed, than to be guided by others more important than him, to believe what his eyes saw, to give himself good-humouredly to the future. He became one of the Communists of the early days, that is, the time of famine, of White and Red terrors colliding head-on, when it was uncertain you would survive; a time of workers' revolts defeated in the West, of small lice-ridden armies dressed in rags making their way through Siberian forests, emerging from the sea at Perekop. At the time, no one doubted that in ten years either we would all have been hanged, shot, imprisoned, or else there would be free countries, governed by reason and equality, offering the world the example of an effective idealism. The Italian doubted it less than others. Smiling, he would wave aside the criticisms and inklings of concern that myself and a few others were already entertaining, trying to gauge the internal dangers of dictatorship. 'Oh, everything will work out!', he said.

²⁷ Nicola Bombacci (1879–1945): former trade unionist, member of the Partito Socialista Italiano, represented Italy at the Second Congress of the Communist International in 1920; among the founder-members of the PCI in 1921. Expelled from the Party in 1927, he joined the Fascists in 1934, later becoming a key advisor to Mussolini and propagandist for the Republic of Salò. Shot with Mussolini on 28 April 1945.

‘These are the pains of childbirth.’ The vivid phrase was at the time often a good enough response. Man is born in pain, for higher things—you are right, comrade!

Leaving Soviet prisons, I came back to the West more than ten years later. The comrades I had just left behind were being shot in cellars. I informed myself about the faces of the past. The leader of the Italian PC, my friend Gramsci, was dying in prison. I asked about Bombacci, in whom I had faith. ‘That bastard!’ came the reply. ‘He’s got permission in Italy to publish a paper that still dares to call itself a worker’s paper. He’s playing at being an admiring opposition.’

The assassination of Giacomo Matteotti, the massacre of the Rosselli brothers—details, overheads!²⁸ My old comrade swallowed these sickening pills, and I think I know how. ‘Small crimes and even fairly big crimes don’t count, Monsieur! What counts is the breadth of the vision and its realization.’ The unpardonable error is to admit that the verdict of force is always valid and definitive. A historical event can only be judged to have been just if it works towards human fulfilment, if it defends and enhances humankind. Without that, victories are no more than mediocre or deadly accidents. Nothing remained for the ex-revolutionary—perhaps enlightened, I imagine, about a few major lapses—but to gird himself for a last chance at a completely laughable salvation. I am told he was one of the most active organizers of the fascist republic in the North of Italy, the anti-republican republic of a fascism in which fear had taken the place of eloquence. He was thus one of the executioners of the men who were defending the hopes of his youth.

1946

Morelia, 16 May 1946. Yesterday evening, in a dark street in this little old Spanish town, the evening cool and airy, I was suddenly seized by one of those oppressive dizzy spells that have been striking me very frequently of late, and which weaken me to a distressing extent. My heart beats strongly and with difficulty; I feel a psychological anguish at the top of my chest, slightly to the left I think, and when things are very bad, my head feels so throbbingly dizzy that I’m afraid I’ll fall, standing

²⁸ Giacomo Matteotti (1885–1924): lawyer and socialist politician, kidnapped and killed by the Fascists. Brothers Carlo (1899–1937) and Nello Rosselli (1900–1937): historians, founders of the anti-Fascist movement *Giustizia e Libertà*; both assassinated in France by members of the fascist organization *La Cagoule*.

up straight becomes impossible. Sometimes manage to overcome this through force of will, but more often need to lie down and wait for the feeling to pass. It's not painful; it's maybe worse. Wearing-down of the heart? Altitude? Nerves, that is, a nervous reaction to a more or less constant state of anxiety? All these at the same time?

In that Morelia alleyway, it struck me that I could die just like that, suddenly, almost without suffering, and that I should from now on in any case live facing this simple eventuality. I thought of walking, through an effort of will, to the main road and hailing a taxi there. My heart and the dizziness forced me to sit on a doorstep, while a dreadful drunken *Indio* tottered past, mumbling something, he called me 'doctor', he was dressed in something reddish. A car happened to pass by, and the driver agreed to take me to the Hotel Roma.

The idea of the proximity of my death, which has appeared in sharper relief now than in many other similar, recent circumstances, doesn't frighten me at all, and it's not even a real hindrance to my daily activities. The hindrance is physical, and substantial: I now fear walking aimlessly, not knowing if the faintness will come upon me unexpectedly. I feel I have entered into a state of disposability, ready to leave, simply to disappear. I tried to attain this state of calm disposability, and thought I had achieved it, with quite some effort, in the GPU prison in Moscow in 1933, when I had to envisage myself being executed. Today I think that I only imagined I'd achieved it then, and had in fact attained a calm that was more apparent, more superficial than profound. Now, whether through being worn down by life or through a more secure sense of serenity (with its underlying dose of despair), my disposability is more certain. Enough, in any case, for me not to feel any all-consuming anguish or to lose my taste for any of the things I love—those close to me, life, ideas, work.

A sensuous attachment to life, in its very details, its everydayness, an incessant curiosity about the world and about thought. The desire to see better times, or at least the beginning of better times. Resentment at being interrupted in the middle of my activities, with a mature brain, a character full of dross but somewhat purified. Dissatisfaction at not having held on until some sort of victory was achieved in the long battle.

1 July 1946. Read the idealist critiques of Marxism by Dwight Macdonald and others.²⁹ In general, they confirm the following truism of the

²⁹ Serge is probably referring to a series of articles that appeared in *Politics* in 1945–46, collected in Dwight Macdonald, *The Root Is Man*, Alhambra, CA 1953.

dullest Marxist propaganda: that intellectuals only heed strength and success, don't handle the shock of defeat well, are easily demoralized. To be developed:

1. Idea that Marxism taught (teaches) *conscious* participation—well-informed, objective scientific consciousness and moral consciousness spurring on, nurturing the will—in history as it unfolds. Man no longer the object of history but the subject. Making history. Is a different attitude possible, without man abandoning himself? Consider the risks of this, the insufficiency of objective knowledge, the motives of the will, the weakness of the individual in society.

2. Idea that first the socialist movement, then the Russian Revolution succeeded (partially) in curing the oppressed and exploited masses—and the intelligentsia which had rallied to those masses—of the age-old social inferiority complex of the perpetually defeated. Fertile role of the socialist movement in this sense invaluable. Idea that socialism altered the modern notion of man and his rights. (Socialist internationalism broke the circle of the white man's humanism.)

1947

1947: *Citizen Vyshinsky*. In 1933 I occupied a rather comfortable cell in the Lubyanka prison in the centre of Moscow. I did not know what I was accused of, but I knew that I could be shot, as several of my corridor neighbours had just been. I was alone and held in secret. None of it surprised me, since I belonged to the opposition that was calling for a little democracy. One evening into my solitude there came a strapping, fair-haired fellow who introduced himself as chief secretary to the chairman of the Council of People's Commissars, under Lenin's successor Alexei Rykov. This veteran revolutionary in his forties, also a member of the opposition, was expecting to be tortured and killed, because he thought that through him the prosecutors were trying to get at Rykov, the ex-chairman of the Council. We at once became friends. He told me that at that very moment Vyshinsky, state prosecutor at the Supreme Court, was involved in a strange trial against British engineers. 'What a paradox!' said my cellmate Nesterov. 'During the revolution, the counter-revolutionary Vyshinsky was organizing strikes among suppliers of the Soviets in Ukraine. And the party sent me down there to fight him! Now I'm in a cell, and he's making speeches for the prosecution in the name of the Soviet regime! I can't count on any goodwill from him.' My friend

Nesterov was subsequently tortured and shot; Vyshinsky pursued his brilliant career.³⁰

Andrey Yanuarevich Vyshinsky (now aged sixty-four) was unknown throughout the Russian Revolution. Of bourgeois origins, while studying law he was active in the moderate, Menshevik tendency of Russian social democracy. In 1917, when the hurricanes of revolution blew up, Vyshinsky seems not to have taken part in any important events, but remained a moderate social democrat and enemy of Bolshevism.

In 1920 Bolshevism won. Vyshinsky stopped fighting against it and indeed gave it his support. The revolution was generous to those who joined it. Vyshinsky was accepted into the Communist Party and taught criminal law at the University of Moscow; he was appointed state prosecutor at the Supreme Court; he published pamphlets and books that went unnoticed. It was only in 1928 that Vyshinsky's name suddenly began appearing on newspaper front pages. As president of the Supreme Court, Vyshinsky oversaw the trials of the fifty-three engineers from the Shakhty mines (Donetsk), accused of sabotage in collusion with the French and Polish military. Five executions followed. This was just after Stalin had taken power; the totalitarian regime was taking the place of the revolutionary regime and it needed scapegoats.

From that year on, the citizen-prosecutor Vyshinsky was involved in the preparations for all trials of this kind. As the first five-year plan was on the point of completion, Soviet industry entered an extraordinarily destructive period. There were simultaneous shortages of all manufactured items. The forced collectivization of agriculture led to the destruction of farm animals and the worst famine Russia had ever seen. Experts tried in vain to warn the government that it was making mistakes and committing crimes against the nation, and that the famine would claim millions of victims. They were arrested, often tortured, sentenced without trial in their thousands; a few were carefully selected for show trials to demonstrate to the poor Russian people that the famine had been organized by the agents of France and England. A vast nightmare spread over the USSR.

Then came the infernal years 1936–38. For nearly six years the entire Left Opposition had been in prison. But in the Communist Party, and even in minor government posts, there were many old Marxists, Lenin's companions, heroes of the civil war, educated Marxists, socialist humanists, faithful to the ideals of the revolution. This wasn't what they'd wanted.

³⁰ After the war, as Stalin's Foreign Minister, Vyshinsky (1883–1954) was the Soviet representative at the UN.

They protested, they denounced the Stalinist regime. Did they conspire? They would have been justified in doing so, but each of them was under surveillance day and night. And the Moscow trials opened, prepared first by the secret police or GPU, then by the indefatigable Prosecutor Vyshinsky. Almost all the revolutionaries of 1917–23 appeared; the founders of the Soviet Republic, the companions of Lenin, the oldest friends of Stalin himself were shot in their thousands, some after three trials in the course of which Prosecutor Vyshinsky would speak against them for hours on end.

Prosecutor Vyshinsky showed extraordinary talent in the use of imposture, the crudest lies, criminal fantasy and a cynicism that defied common sense. No material evidence was ever produced; no verifiable fact was ever verified; no idea that had been expressed was ever presented as it really was; no misinterpretation or forgery was ever dismissed. The old Bolsheviks were accused of conspiring with England, Japan, the Nazi Third Reich and the Socialist International. One of them ‘confessed’ to having travelled to Norway, by plane, in the winter of 1935, to visit Trotsky; the Norwegian authorities confirmed that no plane arrived in Oslo during that time. The accused was shot. Refutations and arguments poured in from Paris, London and everywhere. The state prosecutor ignored them.

During these trials Vyshinsky collaborated closely with two of Stalin’s trusted men, the heads of the political police Yagoda and Yezhov, later shot themselves, because they knew too much and perhaps because it was driving them mad. Vyshinsky peacefully outlived them; perhaps offering more guarantees of unscrupulous servility. He will serve to the end. Physically he’s a small, stout man with white hair, good manners, very calm, with the face of an average intellectual and very cold, bluish eyes. An American sailor who had seen him during a crossing recently called him ‘a nice little old man’.

2 February 1947. Fiesta in Erongarícuaro. Sunday morning, I go through the market with Elisabeth Onslow Ford and Jeannine (big hat).³¹ A group of about twenty dancers are going down a little street leading to the mountains. Indian violinists, a clarinet player, two double bass players. Very dark, wearing *sarapes* and work shirts. Several dances on the *plaza*. It’s Candlemas, the Presentation of the Baby Jesus.

The dancers are smart, most of them in new suits of good fabric. Some are *braceros* who have worked in the United States, others have

³¹ Elisabeth Onslow Ford: English photographer, sister of Gordon Onslow Ford.

hired the clothes. Masked to look like white men, very blond, bearded and smiling. These masks of pink flesh with golden moustaches and beards are very well made, with different expressions and uniform in tone. The golden-haired man is fairly stupid, slightly drunk; he has a benevolent-erotic expression. He is wearing a magnificent hat covered with coloured flowers and ribbons, overladen, dripping with plumes of multi-coloured paper and cellophane ribbons. He has a cane, decorated with paper flowers of red, white, pink, green, etc. Several wear gloves, one has put sunglasses over his mask. Several have pale yellow shoes. Clearly in their Sunday best. Two dancing girls (played by vigorous lads). Dull red dresses (like those worn by Kurds in Tiflis), held in at the (thick) waist by a *rebozo*. Behatted, masks of white women with stupid smiles, extremely realistic.

During the dance all these masks gain in expression through the dancer's personality. Their erotic smiles perhaps come from the fact that they have fleshy, half-lowered eyelids over unmoving blue eyes: the dark slit through which the dancer sees is above the eyelid. Women: the local white stockings. Two demons in shirt-sleeves wear highly effective masks of black hardwood. The devil leads the dance. He's an agile young man, putting a lot of effort into it without seeming to. He wears a kind of helmet, with two thin horns decorated in pinkish red flowers poking up at the back. A fine black muzzle, prominent, like a wild boar's snout. Long white canines coming down from the mouth, the little tongue of purple fabric waving around. On his black forehead are four hard little red horns, symmetrically pointing in two directions. A black jerkin with silver decoration over a red shirt. An officer's sword hanging from an Indian belt. White shorts, black stockings. Decorative, the devil.

'Dance of the Capitalist': during the *fiesta*, a character in a top hat, frock coat and boots, with the mask of a concerned Spaniard, goes around the square carrying his little suitcase, a stranger to joy, to everything, nervous, grotesque and hurried. He's the ridiculous man—the White Man—who thinks only of his money. And he reminds you of the devil.

Translated by Ros Schwartz and Trista Selous