

# Three Documents, 1921-1926

## Victor Serge

Introduction by Dave Renton

These documents, a poem, a short piece of fiction, and an article, were written by Victor Serge between 1921 and 1926 for the left-literary magazine *Clarté*. The paper itself was founded in Paris in 1919. It was established to express the views of a circle of left-wing intellectuals disillusioned by war and anxious for radical change. The progress of *Clarté* was shaped by the changing tastes of the left intelligentsia. The unity of the early 1920s gave way to division, as reformist socialists split away from revolutionaries. Meanwhile, the insurgents were divided between those supporting Trotsky and Stalin. The British historian David Caute indicates some of the personalities involved in the magazine:

“*Clarté* was given substance and vitality by Henry Barbusse ... but when Barbusse, an ardent convert to Communism, hailed the foundation of the Third International (Comintern), and the French section of *Clarté* converted itself into a pressure-group agitating for a Communist take-over of the Socialist Party, the foreign affiliates withdrew ... [Maxim] Gorky briefly lent his distant support and Anatole France showed a transitory interest, but [Romain] Rolland refused to have anything to do with it.”<sup>1</sup>

Victor Serge's first contribution to *Clarté* was a 1921 poem, 'Mitrailleuse' ('Machine-Gun'). Subsequently, Serge was commissioned by the editors to write a series of articles on the condition of Russian art and culture after 1917. This series was titled "Intellectual Life in Russia". Serge published articles on Pilniak, Chaliapine, Mayakovsky, Lebedinsky and Ivanov. In 1923, Serge also published a short story, 'La flamme sur la neige' ('Flame on the Snow'). The following year, Serge published a four-part series, on the role played by Lenin in 1917. From 1926, *Clarté* came out much more openly in support of Trotsky. The nature of Serge's articles also changed. Now he wrote about Russia after the revolution, new tactics in war, marriage in Russia, Bolshevism in Asia, the Finnish Commune, and class struggle in the Chinese Revolution. There are several themes which recur throughout Serge's essays. They include

Victor Serge's support for the initial goals of 1917, which he believed had been a truly democratic and socialist transformation; his sceptical interest in the relationship between art and revolution; Serge's identification with Trotsky's fight against Stalinism; his interest in problems of morality in the process of violent, social revolution.

The first two pieces are examples of Victor Serge's creative writing. The poem 'Machine Gun' was written in the midst of the Civil War that followed the Revolution. The Bolsheviks were isolated and besieged by hostile military forces. Therefore they responded with the appropriate military tactics. Would this process undermine the revolution itself? Serge's poem acknowledges the violence, and is ambivalent as to the future. The second, prose piece, 'Flame on the Snow', is again concerned with the dilemmas of the early heroic period that followed 1917. Impressionistic as it is, we can observe again the combination of some doubt and growing enthusiasm with which Serge experienced these Red years.

The third piece, 'New Aspects of the Problem of War' addresses the politics of left-wing resistance to war. By 1926, when Serge wrote it, the socialism of *Clarté* had developed in a more practical and less literary direction. Its author was living in the Soviet Union, having worked for a period in central Europe as an employee of the Comintern. Serge's piece condemns the state war preparations, which he had seen taking place all over Europe. It points out that future wars will depend ever more closely on industrial control. It warns the workers' movement of a wave of reaction, in which Italian fascism has been just one model. Victor Serge argues that the resistance to reaction must include work among the European armies. While anticipating elements of the great Marxist theories of fascism, there are other insights in the piece, which may seem more desperate, even shrill. Anyone who looks to Serge for direct guidance in our own anti-war moment will be disappointed. Since his time, the balance between propaganda and direct compulsion has shifted. We should remember, though, the brutal war that Hitler unleashed against the German working class, within days of seizing power in 1933. When set

against the desperate conditions of the European crisis, Serge's argument is more interesting and also more true.

All three documents are published here in translation for the first time.

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## Machine Gun

At the gates of the homes, at the gates of the palaces – that we have conquered – everywhere in the city<sup>2</sup> where the riot drags on cold, dull and strong, everywhere at the doors of our homes the machine-guns in the dark corners.

Dull, to bring death;  
blind, low, at the base of the earth,  
blind, cold, of steel, of iron,  
with the metal of their hate  
elemental,

with their steel teeth ready to bite,  
their clockwork,  
wheels, nuts, springs,  
their short black mouths on the mounts  
squat ...

Oh, the tragic machine, the thing of steel, of iron, inert, which mutilates seconds, at the fatal moment of battle,  
which digests seconds – tac-tac-tac – the seconds drop to the infinite – and lives  
tumble to the great cold of the tombs,  
The machine  
which eats, tears, bursts, pierces, excavates the flesh, becomes twisted in blood and nerves,  
breaks the bones, makes the rails sing with the hollow of perforated chests, makes the brain ooze with the breaking of great faces:  
grey among blackened blood.  
Low machine to kill, everywhere, in the town of dull riot,  
lurking at the doors of our homes, watching for what wants to be born,  
watching  
for what lifts from human hearts and from the depths of the live earth,  
for what rises from burning faith, from mad hope and from anger – from want and from light –  
from enthusiasm and from prayer,  
which goes up to flower – acts, cries – flames:  
the revolt ...  
Low to cut down flight, the machine-gun in ambush: victory to the man of iron laws,  
victory to metal on flesh – and in the dream – the law of death.  
And this machine,  
our hands and our brains built. O Father! Did

we know what we made?

Petrograd, 22 July 1919

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## Flame on the Snow

Snow and night.<sup>3</sup> Burdens weigh. You stumble in the deep and deceitful whiteness of the snow. Around, men walk heavily, carrying rifles. The White Finns show hostility in their faces, closed, hard, heavy. They keep silent. The barrels of their guns seem attracted to the ground. A small bridge, sentry box, in the dark another man presses his two hands on his rifle. A bonnet of astrakhan tops a grey, pale coat and the thin face of a peasant. We greeted him without emphasis, tightened hearts, low voices, in spite of the exaltation: "Hello brother!" I do not see the eyes in the great shadows of the face turned towards me. The man asks gently: "Do you have white bread?" He takes the tendered round loaf. "*Golodno?*" You are hungry? – "Yes. It is nothing", he answers only to the gate of immense Russia, our brother, the Red soldier, upright in the cold, the night, the hunger – and alone.

*One is hungry, but it is nothing ...*

The white night with distant bursts of shell, abrupt passages by the empty streets, the roughcast trucks of bayonets. Hands grow numb on the rifle. But this midnight with its infinite pallor, this silence, this waiting become a singular peace. You feel almost liberated. Free, simple, calm, although it arrives.

Crosses of rifles stand in front of closed doors. Our steps sound in the mildness of unknown homes. Faces of anxiety, lamps suddenly lit among the grey half-light. Papers which you decipher badly in front of the window, the frightened eyes that you explore in an acute and sad glance, "Are you lying?"

Return. Tire. The rifle weighs. It is necessary. It is necessary. It is necessary. *We will make the new life.*

The crowd – this resolute crowd gathered in the vast quadrangular room, with white columns, the Tauride Palace, this drawn-up crowd, tender, vehement, willingly applauding the orator:

The man with his back arched, a high thick mane of greying hair. The energetic face of an intellectual, stressed voice, categorical gesture which proclaims the determination of the crowd to overcome. It proclaims *terror*.

The song of the crowd.

Young women – no preoccupation with elegance or prettiness, but what valour! – in short hair, their busts clasped by leather clothing or a military blouse; workers, soldiers, peasants, sailors, the crowd singing the *Internationale* after the *Farewell to the Dead*.

This crowd wants to live, to make life. But how many of those who are there have already been killed?

This immense white city, all in silence. Because the sledges do not make noise on snow. The steps do not resonate. A great pale light on all things. Broad, between its pink granite quays, the Neva solid under snow. Far away, the gold arrow of Peter-and-Paul.

The poor tattered people, many teenagers, some children all bearing rifles, with the straps often replaced by string. The hands numb with cold of these poor people. Their grey wretched crossing of the Liteyni prospect, in a determined step. At the end of a bayonet a red flag: *Workers' battalion from Narva district.*

In a noisy barrack room – the walls showing Marx and Lenin framed with red ribbons – this avid group around us, the firm and defying face of the agitator, the pince-nez with gold mounting, these child-like and serious eyes, the comically round nose of the small comrade in leather jacket, the neat moustache of the Cossack – their hurried questions – “Demobilisation? ... the working-class of France? ... is the revolution growing? ...” Anger, distress, revolt against having to answer these men, this woman: *No, you are alone.*

This face without apparent beauty, the vast face, these unpleasant white metal glasses behind which there was always the same serious glance, inattentive, a little distant, very attractive, something understanding and soft ... Our labour until dawn. At dawn, seated on the edge of a window, above the deserted place (the formidable granite mass of St. Isaac's, the enormous gold dome: cold rectangular palaces, and worked on its base this thin bronze rider from another time ...) our search, our thought, our cold reasoning. (“... It is impossible that we would hold out for more than six months, unless ...”) which made us smile us all the same, full of an unlimited confidence ...

This crowd in snow, under the midday sun, following coffins covered with branches of fir trees. Red ribbons, flags. A gold ray is posed on the arrow of the Admiralty. Songs – the song which soars. There are prayers and sobs in this farewell from a living crowd to a crowd of the dead. Here they sleep, behind a granite rampart, those hung, shot, whose throats were cut, those that died of typhus, who all, gave freely and with their souls. Died for the revolution. So often these funerals on the Field of Mars ...

Four thousand soldiers, peasants from Viazma, Ryazan, Tver, Orel, Viatka, Perm – Russians, Tartars, Kirghises, Tcherkesses – four thousand soldiers nourished on dry herrings – hard like stone, that made the gums bleed – fed on four hundred grams of black bread per day, dressed in this icy winter with the old coats of the great war, beating their hands like children and laughing and shouting and humming. The room, made from

the velvet blue-gold of the imperial theatre vibrates suddenly with this clear human joy, *because a sovereign artist sang.*

Six hours of voyage by a frozen north wind, along Neva. Stiff, we heat ourselves in turns in the boiler room. And here in the Scandinavian cold landscape the dead carcass of an old castle: the Schüsselburg. And here, in its cottage, the coffin holding the large lengthened body of the anarchist Justin Jouk, the great face of Justin Jouk.

How they have great faces, those of us that are dead!

The Silver Wood, one June morning; the river caressing and murmuring between the meadows and the wood. A dome of a church – in blue or silver, I no longer know – emerging with the sun. Light in all things, fair light of Russia; and the houses of children, peaceful in the tepid warmth of June, in the greenery, in the murmur of water, in waiting for the future. Thin, long camp beds. Along the walls running with tar, the coloured drawings of the young girls; all this clear country of children so close to our town caught up in civil war ...

A young girl – seven years old – with very large black eyes, encased in a fine, small Kalmuk face, a small refined spirit, precocious, sensitive, encased in a thin body, slowly debilitated by the hunger: Tatiane, the daughter of an aristocrat, whom you fondly call Tania, Tanioucha, Taniouchetchka. She says:

“Since you are a Bolshevik, answer me! Why was Lavr Andreievitch shot?”

I am a Bolshevik, little Tania, and I do not know why Lavr Andreievitch was shot.

A street corner, the blackening mud of the thaw, a child who sells matches: stolen matches, the prize of speculation. A well-dressed passer-by, in military clothing, booted. The child follows with anger in its eyes: *Bourgeois!*

And the immense dead factory, scrap in the walkways, rusted benches, formidable squatted machines, oiled, inactive, the halls with windows whose panes have been broken. There will remain soon only the metal casings drawn up on the ruins of a city ... The immense dead factory, thirty thousand workers in 1914, four and a half thousand present today. Others: dead, returned to the ground, they died the best, or soldiers.

But near the home of the porter, this negligible small garden cultivated with such an amount of care; and in the immense dead factory, a buzzing hall where seventy men tortured by hunger get on with rebuilding an engine.

The city. The streets narrow, dark. The streets in a state of siege which ended at eight, before nightfall. Far and wide, men with rifles, standing.

City, night, snow. In the homes, twinkling gleams of light. At the bottom of the cold rooms, an old man shrivelled in his fur-lined coat, his hands frozen, reads by the gleam of a candle:

*The Mysticism of Vladimir Soloviev*, and in the

dark of the room, a teenager rolled in a soldier's coat who shivers and thinks of great things, *the electrification of the Urals*.

The countryside. You can walk there for hours through fields or woods without hearing a voice of man, without seeing a cottage; but you cannot be there for a long time on the road without seeing, surrounded by birches a green chapel with a small triangular pediment, and a pinnacle of blue Byzantine – or of another colour, always bright, clear, radiant colour.

Space – the fields where the train goes during the so-long hours, the fields with their sparse villages: some grey thatched roofs, the fields with their remote churches whose gold cross always light up as the sun sets, and the woods of birch, white slenderness, the silver plated slenderness of the birch trees,

(that our ancient storytellers compared to virgins ...)

Again the city, the old Fabergé store, goods from Paris, *objets d'art* (the sign is faded). Three balls divide the large window, scraps of paper (leaves torn from an accounts book, numbered 124), “*3rd Office of Supply. This 24 February, one dry herring pound at cart B.*” – From the windows of the old hotel Regina, poor, sickly soldiers look out. – Here: *Aline Fashions*, in large scripted gold letters. Below: *Headquarters of the special battalion of Kazan sector – Cafe Empire*. No, “Club of the 14th State Print works”. In the entrance, Karl Marx, framed with red ribbons. The ribbons are bleached; the portrait loses its colour.

By the street bordered with churches, palaces – where our clubs stand – ransacked stores, theatres, libraries, public buildings, the book centre, the military academy (a bank previously) by the street which goes from the Admiralty, built by Peter the Great, to the statue of Tsar Alexander, so heavy on his heavy bronze horse that he must be contemplating already with his overwhelming weight the fall of his empire.

By this street, the Mongolian riders pass singing. Red ribbons on the handle of their sabres, at the front the red star with five branches.

(You spoke, o poet, so much love for the things of Europe:

“Yes, we are Scythians! Yes, Asians ...”)

On the handle of their sabres, red ribbons.

Morning, spring, the desire to smile. People, in the square, read the paper which has just been posted. Why this word *The Truth*, this word of few syllable, is it so hard, sharp, curt, in all languages: *Pravda, Wahrheit, Truth, Verdad?* – a scrap of paper flapping in the wind.

“33: Nikitor Arkadievitch Ijine, 33 years old, speculator. 34: Denskaya Elena Dmitrievna, 24 years old, dressmaker, spy. 35: Vassili Vassilievitch Onéguine, 42 years old, officer, aristocrat, proven counter-revolutionary ... 58: Abram Abramovitch, 30 years old, civil servant, member of the

Communist Party, convicted of corruption ...” shot.

Sixty! says a young voice. They read abstractly, without ceasing to smile. He is twenty years old, an aspiring Red; she, nineteen, militant in charge with of Dynamo factory. Which one will be killed beneath Kronstadt?

“Decree of the Council of People's Commissars No XXX. Suppression of rent ...”

“Decree of the Council of People's Commissars No XXX. Suppression of private property in furniture ...”

“Decree of the Council of People's Commissars No XXX. Suppression of illiteracy ...”

“Decree of the Council of People's Commissars No XXX. Creation of the autonomous Tartar Republic.”

“Decree ...”

One reads standing, in the street, in the snow. The cold grips, you hear gun-fire.

She came often about midnight, after a telephone call (“do you have tea?”). She shook her fair ashy hair. Her eyes had a good serious smile. She said:

“You understand, the regional devolution of the metal industry ... Because the Higher Council of the Economy and the Trade Union ...”, or:

“Bogdanov's theses, from a rigorously Marxist a point of view ...”, or

“The sub-section of the organisation of the Committee of the 2nd Sector decided ...”

She lit a cigarette. Her lips had the pink colour of a ripe fruit.

Contempt for words – for the old words. Contempt for the ideas which mislead. Contempt for the hypocritical and cruel West which invented Parliaments, the public press, the asphyxiating gases, the prison system, after-dinner literature. Contempt for all that vegetates in satisfaction with these things.

Hatred for the formidable machine used to crush the weak – all disarmed humanity – for the vice of Law, Police, Clergy, Schools, Armies, Factories, Penal Colonies. Hatred for those who need that system, the rich, class hatred.

The will to undergo everything, to suffer everything, achieve everything in order to finish. Inexorable will. The will to live finally according to the new law, equal work, or to die showing the way. The willingness to plough up the ground and its souls so well that the earth shall be new tomorrow.

Consciousness that the present hardly exists; and that it is necessary to give everything, at this hour, to the future so that there may be a present. Consciousness that all of us are nothing if we are not with our class, its humanity rising. Consciousness that work ahead does not have limits, that it requires a million arm and brains, that it is the only justification of our lives. Consciousness that a world collapses and that you



can live only while giving yourself to the world which waits to be born.

Petrograd-Moscow, 1920-21

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### New Aspects of the Problem of War

“The only possible method of combating war is the formation and maintenance of underground organisations, carrying on prolonged anti-war activities, and made up of revolutionaries serving in the war.” Lenin.

Twelfth anniversary of 2 August 1914.<sup>4</sup>

All politics is prediction. The working class must use the periods of calm to prepare for the fights of the future. We are between two wars. The “Great” imperialist war dominates our past. The armaments, the rivalries between the powers, the lying games of diplomacy, the formidable interests of the imperialist groupings who divide a world as the sun sets beneath their feet, all these facts prepare methodically before our eyes the coming war.

At different times, in these last years, the problem of war has been posed in agitation. Not once, has it been properly scanned to its depths. The working-class organisations seem dominated by an inertia encouraging us “to let events mature” (we will see what happens!). We have most often limited ourselves to the repetition of old anti-war formulas from the socialist international and a few well-struck phrases of Lenin. The error seems great to me. Repetition alone, even the skilful development of the best formulas of the pre-war period, is not enough any more to outline a solution to the problem of war. All facts of the case have profoundly changed. Nothing is less compatible with the intellectual discipline taught to us by Marx and Lenin than the pure and simple repetition of formulas that have since been exceeded. Even a brief examination of the new conditions in which the difficulty arises will be enough, I hope, to make militants reflect – and all those who think of our future.

Before 1914, the revolutionary doctrines possessed a beautiful verbal radicalism. The declaration of war would be answered by general strike and insurrection. The first days of August 1914, days of great fear and great disavowal, showed the limits of this illusion.

During these last years, Communist doctrine has held almost in entirety to a remarkable document compiled by Lenin on 4 December 1922 for the Russian delegation at the Hague Congress of the Peace, organised by the Amsterdam Trade Union Federation. This document, published for the first French time two years later, has often been reproduced since.<sup>5</sup> It is a tough document of

proletarian realism. The “hopelessly stupid and futile resolutions of the working Congresses” are treated there with the contempt which any fake-revolutionary verbiage deserves. Lenin underlines the constant danger of war, commits us to study it and to envisage it under all its aspects, invites us to solve with the eyes of the masses the problems of national defense and of defeatism, reminding us of the need for underground organisation. This document is, remember, neither an article intended for publication, nor a thesis. It is an *aide de memoir*. It is obvious that Lenin expresses not his whole opinion there on the war – he assumes the familiarity of comrades with his thoughts – but the ideas which recent events brought to his attention. Several sentences are there, several right sentences, whose mechanical repetition, i.e. their application to changed circumstances, could be extremely dangerous. They produce a deep impression. Here:

“It is impossible to ‘retaliate’ to war by a strike, just as it is impossible to ‘retaliate’ to war by revolution in the simple and literal sense of these terms. ‘Boycott war’ – that is a silly catch-phrase. Communists *must take part* in every war, even the most reactionary.”

Lenin says that “The question of *the defence of the fatherland* will inevitably arise, and the majority of the working people will inevitably decide it in favour of their bourgeoisie.

“In all probability, the communist press in most countries *will also disgrace itself*.”

The essential part of his positive thought is held in these words:

“The only possible method of combating war is the formation and maintenance of underground organisations, carrying on prolonged anti-war activities, and made up of revolutionaries serving in the war.”

Even though it is necessary to keep away from mechanical repetition of the first formulas, the last phrase quoted above, contains all practical truth for a long time to come. The developments which follow will lead us to restate this conclusion, with new force.

Immense changes have been produced in the world, since 1914. The most decisive include the victory of the proletarian revolution in Russia, the aggravation of class struggle in all the civilised countries, the awakening of the oppressed people of the colonies and the semi-colonies, the new distribution of wealth (the financial hegemony of the United States), the new development of military technique (aviation, chemistry, the industrialisation of war).

To pose under these conditions the problem of the war, in the terms where it was posed formerly, before Verdun, Red October, the Republic of Canton, before the new plans for industrial mobilisation, would be a really unforgivable naivete. All things are changed, many to our

advantage. With the proviso that we should understand the change.

The enemy knows it.

The very technique of war makes it increasingly difficult to sustain the distinction between combatants and non-combatants. In the last war there was – I believe – behind each gunner in the trench, five soldiers or workers absorbed by industrial work and the organisation of massacre. The number of workers behind the combatants will undoubtedly grow with the further mechanisation of slaughter. War is waged now in the factory, more than on the battle field. One is the prolongation of the other. It is the factory which determines the value of the soldiers and the talent of the officers that are *at its service*. From this fact, it follows that the industrial centers are more than fortresses, the vulnerable points of a country, they are the very places where each side will seek to land its mortal blow. A good industrial mobilisation is the underlying condition of military operation. Corollary: the war will start with the mobilisation of the whole nation. Indeed the life of the *entire* proletariat will be threatened because the development of aviation and of chemical weapons makes it possible for the enemy to achieve its goal, the destruction of the industrial centers.

From the start of the great power duel, the stake will be the future of the proletariat.

France, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, Romania, Belgium, England, Italy, Germany, Poland, Japan and the United States have developed organisations which are designed to proceed with speed for the mobilisation of the whole nation, in war. The whole nation, it is said, but this is primarily about labour, i.e. proletarians and technicians. In modern warfare, the capitalist State is nothing more than one vast factory for the manufacture of death.

In future wars, the mobilisation of the rear will have as much importance as that of the troops themselves. All is fixed. With each factory, each workshop has its task; each man his function. Not a machine is omitted from the inventories. In the preparation of the machine, it goes without saying, the apparatus of coercion will strike the first blow.

The “plans of national organisation for times of war” start with repression. Vast and delicate, the industrial mobilisation *requires* that the proletariat be reduced to passive obedience. It *must* begin with a decisive aggression against the organisations of the working avant-garde, the party, revolutionary unions, cooperatives, etc. In a word, the mobilisation *must be, and will mean, the throttling of the proletariat*.

Such is the logic of the preparation of war. The bosses know it. The logic is theirs.

Other factors drawn from the same reserve of experience confirm these forecasts.

In 1914, the war was preceded and followed by an extremely powerful action exerted by the governments on public opinion. This was the *mobilisation of consciences*. It was necessary to provide ideologies of war, sufficiently convincing, impressive enough so that millions of men could be led to the slaughter. The mobilisation of consciences was made possible by the role of the intellectuals who appeared at the decisive hours as good servants of bourgeois order. It was made possible by the monopoly of the press, the treason of international socialism and especially by the play of the psychological factors of the time. The ideas of Democracy, of the Rights of Nationalities, of Civilisation, provided to the imperialist Allies an effective justification. Civilisation, Law, the Mission of the German people rendered the same service to the Central Empires. The duties of Latins, Slavs, the Anglo-Saxons, the Americans and the Germans served as two sides of one coin. You cannot lead the masses to commit murder without justifying it by great ideas. The impossibility of mobilizing the consciences of the workers against the Russian revolution ruined the Allied intervention against the Soviets. Ever since the Third International was established in the name of the class-conscious workers, including the colonial peoples, there has been a difficulty in mobilizing consciences for colonial war. This obstacle prevented England from subjecting modern Turkey and from “re-establishing order” in Canton.

Here a new fact appears, of great importance. It seems that the bourgeoisie has exhausted its ideological resources. Neither “Democracy” nor the “Right of Nationalities”, neither the “Defense of Civilisation”, nor the theory of the “last war”, nor even, supreme illusion, the assertion that “the Defeated will pay”, can be used again.<sup>6</sup> It is probable that Japan and the United States, the likely belligerents of tomorrow, will be able to improvise vigorous ideologies of war. The European bourgeoisie cannot do it any more.

The only watchword able to galvanize the bourgeoisie and a notable part of the middle class is that of anti-bolshevism, of the counter-revolution. The defence of property, the defence of the Rich, these are slogans civil war and not of wars between States. The needs for repression, the first act of any mobilisation, will undoubtedly oblige our rulers to exploit anti-bolshevism to the depths, in order to realize against the avant-garde of the proletariat, a coalition of all forces of social conservatism. We repeat our forecast. *The war will have to start with a period of civil war*. The bourgeoisie will be placed from the beginning, because of its intellectual deficiency, in need of striking quick and hard, with its chances of success appreciably reduced.

If there is not, in effect, an ideology of war that can motivate the popular masses, there is on the

other hand a revolutionary ideology which can lead them from resistance to revolt, the class-conscious proletariat being, in its own eyes, the object of an unprovoked attack.

The moment of mobilisation is no longer the pinnacle of power for the State bourgeoisie. Nor will it be madness for the workers to confront it. It is on the contrary just another difficult and dangerous phase of the class struggle. The advantage gained at this time can be decisive. The offensive must be abrupt, because the enemy will certainly not waste time in order to help those who need to be surprised. If the offensive succeeds as a preventive counter-revolution, then the bourgeoisie will endeavour to draw from its victory the greatest advantages, and the proletariat will not be a political factor, for a long period to come. If, on the other hand, the proletarian resistance inflicts a failure, even partial, on the intentions of the rulers, then the future of the revolutionary movement will be safeguarded. Significant positions will be acquired. A state of mind will exist in which the class feels confident to overcome. The possibility of resistance by the attacked proletariat, transformed by success into insurrection, cannot be excluded *a priori*.

One sees vast and complex prospects which need to be considered. The armed peace is an ambush. Even more than in the past, the states will endeavour to control events. The war must be sudden, the charge decisive. The most elementary theory of war states the following, you must surprise the enemy. The enemy at home, first of all.

We arrive at these conclusions. Events will astonish the masses by their suddenness. The proletariat will be taken by surprise. Such is the first act of mobilisation. It will be the attack of the police force, of the executives of the army, safe troops, of some colonial troops if need be, of fascist bands, against the organisations of the working class. Could it be a question of "retaliating" against war by strikes or insurrection? Admittedly, not. The old theory, dismissed by Lenin, of the *offensive of the proletariat* against the war, does not work. But the proletariat must be defended. No-one can envisage where its defense will lead. It could lead very far. The class will be obliged to save its underground organisations, its cadres, its most invaluable leaders. We cannot dare to hope that the bourgeoisie will neglect to shoot at the beginning of a war the potential Lenins and Trotskys of the future.

The development of the class struggle is such, in spite of the relative stabilisation of European capitalism, that Lenin's formula going back to 1922 seems to have been exceeded: "Communists must serve in every war, even the most reactionary."

Let us retain the warning against revolutionary phrase-mongering, against having

illusions in our own strength. But will they let the Communists take part? It would be bold to assume it. The class consciousness of the bourgeoisie has progressed since the revolution of October, in ways we must not ignore. Admittedly, one does not *remove* mass parties, but they are already decimated. The defeat of the Italian proletariat is in this respect edifying. Admittedly, the course of the history is not stopped; but it has been delayed. The European bourgeoisie which seemed doomed to us in 1919 has obtained a postponement of its sentence. There is no revolutionary predetermination.

I do nothing but outline these problems. I posed them in July 1925 in a series of articles for *International Correspondence*,<sup>7</sup> to which there was no reply (as if this subject were negligible!). I restrict myself to indicating in these last pages the questions which deserve, especially, to be posed. All the arguments here are *doubly* true on the assumption of a direct or indirect war against the Soviet Union.

I reproduce here my conclusions from last year:

"The coming war will start with a class battle. Whatever its objectives are at the beginning, by the end it will be civil war. In this sense, it will be the second suicide attempt of the capitalist world. By brutally inflicted misery, by forced labour in its factories of death, by white terror, by the horror of its massacres, it will release early or late the revolutionary energies of the whole proletariat, the poor peasantry, the middle class crushed in the mill ... The revolutionaries who hold fast until that point will triumph. It is just a question of holding up to that point. At the first day of the war, if not before, the legal Communist parties will be crushed. We need to fight the war and to defend in spite of the war, serious centralised organisation, but it must be flexible and independent, informed, active, resolute, an organisation concealed from the vigilance of the state and its auxiliary press. Underground organisation. We need rabbit warrens of class struggle. At certain points the leaders who leave the shelter of secrecy will receive their ration of lead as surely as if they stood in the front line ...

"Propaganda against the war must be renewed, must be started again, it must be conceived with much more practical precision than in the past, disengaged from the commonplaces inherited from the pre-war period. The study and the disclosure of the bourgeoisie's preparations for war would open rich person possibilities. And we need in the final analysis that for which Lenin called in 1922.

"What do we know of the plans for civil mobilisation? ... What do we know of the technique of repression planned against us?"

"If by some new cataclysm, bourgeois society succeeds in committing mass suicide, it will be up to the proletariat to begin anew, on those bloody

ruins, the succession ... In the next war, it will be much more difficult – but not impossible – than it was in the recent one, to limit the destruction ... Whole countries have been transformed into factories of death, which will devour whole nations ...

“The true interests of the nations, of culture, of the future are defended only by the revolutionary proletariat. From this great truth could be born a great danger. Nothing is certain in the history of the present. Neither the suicide of the capitalist state, nor the saving victory of labour. Organisation, conscience, will, the intelligence of classes in their struggle, these are also determining factors in history. The bourgeoisie will some day dig its own pit. For it to fall in, it must be pushed. This will require the action of the proletariat, helmeted and masked for war. The drama will not resolve itself. We would be foolish to trust fate and nothing is more contrary to the Communist spirit. The war will carry for the possessing classes, guilty of all modern wars, its punishment. But this will be true only if the proletariat achieves its mission consciously. If it sees clearly. If it prepares in advance. If it is not surprised. If it poses in time all the problems of preparation for war.”

Leningrad, August 1926

## Notes

Translator's notes are given in square brackets. Other notes belong to Serge or his editors.

1. [D. Caute, *The Fellow Travellers: A Postscript to the Enlightenment* (London: Quartet Books, 1977), p.55.]
2. [The original of this piece is V. Serge, 'Mitrailleuse', *Clarté* 6 (1921), p.123.]
3. [The original of this piece is V. Serge, 'La Flamme sur la Neige', *Clarté* 33 (1924), pp.208-10.]
4. [This article appeared as V. Serge, 'Les nouveaux aspects du problème de la guerre', *Clarté* 3 (1926), pp.67-70.]
5. "To our knowledge, this document is unknown among French Communists." *Clarté* editors. [It has however been published in English, as 'Notes on the tasks of our delegation at the Hague', V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works: Volume 33* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1966), pp.447-51.]
6. The major causes of this ideological decline are to be found in the general level of social development, which is in its turn governed by economic factors and the class struggle. It is not the place to explore these processes deeply here. V.S.
7. 'The coming war', *International Correspondence* 72-81, July-August 1925. V.S.

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