



Conquered City

Victor Serge

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1919–1920: St. Petersburg, city of the czars, has fallen to the Revolution. Camped out in the splendid palaces of the former regime, the city's new masters seek to cement their control, even as the counterrevolutionary White Army regroups. *Conquered City*, Victor Serge's most unrelenting narrative, is structured like a detective story, one in which the new political regime tracks down and eliminates its enemies—the spies, speculators, and traitors hidden among the mass of common people.

Conquered City is about terror: the Red Terror and the White Terror. But mainly about the Red, the Communists who have dared to pick up the weapons of power—police, guns, jails, spies, treachery—in the doomed gamble that by wielding them righteously, they can put an end to the need for terror, perhaps forever. Conquered City is their tragedy and testament.

Conquered City Details

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From Reader Review Conquered City for online ebook

Don says

This the third of a sequence of novels that took in the themes of imprisonment, the lives of revolutionaries in Barcelona, in an internment camp in France, and on arrival in Red Petrograd, and finally the struggle to hold on to that city during the years of the civil war.

This last volume is a stark portrait of a city gripped in a deep winter, with hunger and disease threatening the population, and with White Russian armies and their foreign allies surrounding the city. A beleaguered Communist party fights to keep the revolution alive but faces strikes and dissent amongst the proletariat whose cause it is supposed to be advancing, as well as splits within its own ranks and outright defections to the other side.

There are no central characters in this novel as such, who might serve to carry the pace of the story forward. Instead the reader returns to groups of individuals who figure as participants in the events. The central tension in the book is the fate of the city itself: will it survive the cold, the hunger, the threat of the war on its doorstep? But within this is the another layer which shapes the events being report: the struggle between the agents of the 'Special Commission' and the people it lists as potential counter-revolutionaries.

The Special Commission - known by its initials at the Cheka - is the paradox at the heart of all Serge's thinking about revolution. On one hand it was made up of the best of the fighters for socialism - men, and a few women, who themselves had been persecuted, imprisoned, threatened with death - by the Czarist police state. Some had seen the world beyond Russian borders, and found it to be as full as cruelty and exploitation as in their own homeland. The idea of freedom from such miseries had taken deep root in their minds; but for the time being they did the work of persecuting police agents.

On the other hand there are those over whom the revolution watches. Supporters of the old regime receive emissaries representing 'greens' - partisans of neither the Reds nor the Whites who fight in bands against both in the forests around the city. They make appeals to anarchists, who fought for the revolution in the old days but now resist the regime that has come into place, but nothing comes of this in the way of reliable alliance. In many ways Serge makes the predicament of these people the true tragedy of revolutionary struggle. They are real human beings in his account, and not merely the wreckers and saboteurs who are denounced in the propaganda of the Special Commission.

Serge the revolutionary lampoons the organs of the revolutionary state. The plethora of executives and committees and commissions with their overlapping authority, reporting crisis and doom to one another and seeming to be deadlocking themselves into inactivity. Food rations are cut back to levels which presage slow starvation. Workers in vital industries down tools and threaten the supply of weapons and ammunition to the frontline. In a room somewhere two men have to consider whether the revolution abandons this northern city in order to better defend its core region. They shrug shoulders and decide it is worth one more effort to push back against the reactionary forces.

The book has a victory for the revolution to report in its concluding sections, but celebration is muted by a parallel account of the latest 'success' of the Special Commission, which announces on wall posters that 34 'counter-revolutionaries, spies, criminals' had been executed by firing squad. The names of people we have been introduced to figure in the list and invite the feeling that the price that has been paid for the survival of the new socialist state has been very high.

Serge wrote this book, together with the others in the trilogy, at a time when the revolution had again on its own children and was consolidating all the powers that would form Stalinism. Despite seeing the seeds of the tyranny in actions that were taken in defence of the new state a decade earlier he resisted the idea that the collapse of revolutionary ideals into totalitarianism had been inevitable. The working people of Russia had in the days of 'Conquered City' finally come out on the side of the Bolsheviks. The fate of the revolution was ultimately sealed by defeats suffered elsewhere which left it isolated and poverty-stricken. As a participant in these struggles, from Spain to Russia, Serge saw that tragic fact more clearly than most.

Anastasia Fitzgerald-Beaumont says

Conquered City by Victor Serge is the second novel that I've read set in the Civil War that followed the 1917 Bolshevik coup in Russia. The first was *The White Guard* by Mikhail Bulgakov which I admired for its clarity, its biting satire and its sheer brilliance. It's set in and around Kiev in the Ukraine at a particularly troubled and uncertain time in history, just as Serge's book is set in and around Saint Petersburg - then called Petrograd – during the same troubled months.

Conquered City is a slightly different order of literary experience. It has flashes of brilliance, though the overall effect is uneven. At some points it's clear, at others opaque; at some points satirical, at others laudatory. I do admire Serge, but in a different way; I admire him above all for his honesty and for his integrity which carries this work – the first book of his I've ever read – from the mundane realms of propaganda into a far higher aesthetic level.

The thing is Serge was a true believer, a professional revolutionary who identified with the Revolution. To that extent he believed that the suffering he describes which such lucidity in *Conquered City* could be overcome; that a floor was being constructed on which the future would dance.

But he was also an idealist, not a quality particularly prized among hard-nosed Bolshevik cadres, the sort of man uncomfortable with self-serving cynicism and the betrayals of expediency. He was the sort of man, in other words, who was incapable of settling down to the rigours of Stalinism.

But there is more here. Serge, it seems to me, was not the type of individual who could ever have made a home in any kind of Russia, least of all the one forged by the Bolshevik Revolution, no matter if the flavour was Lenin, Trotsky or Stalin. Indeed I begin to wonder if the author really understood the true character of the history he lived through and the ideology he embraced, a dangerous step, I know, on the basis of a single reading of a single novel.

Perhaps I'm not being quite fair; there is startling prescience along with the idealism. I recall having an argument over the precise point in *Animal Farm* where the degeneracy started. Most see Orwell's novel as a parable against Stalinism. My interpretation is different. The moral rot clearly sets in before the rise of Napoleon/Stalin; the moral rot sets in when the pigs take the windfall apples for themselves. In Serge's beleaguered city the goods that are available are not evenly distributed, something he is acutely aware of. The workers starve; or rather they are fed on the fine words of Bolshevik apparatchiks, who claim the sausage and bread for themselves.

And then there is this passage on page 47, a parable of bureaucracy, the rope that was to strangle all hopes that the events of 1917 may have raised;

These were not the same outrages, but they had just cost the lives of forty soldiers who had frozen to death near Dno while the overcoats being sent to them were held up in a railroad station because the shipping order hadn't been filled out according to regulations.

Overall Serge has an admiral precision with words. He manages to convey so much with great economy of expression. I thought this passage close to the beginning particularly impressive:

...Comrade Ryzhik, was sleeping in his boots on the same divan where, eighteen months earlier, an old epicurean of the race of the Ruriks amused himself by staring full of enchantment and despair at naked girls in this elegant Louis XV room. Now this epicurean was lying somewhere else, who knew where, naked, with a bristly beard, and a hole clean through his head, on an artillery range under two feet of trampled earth, four feet of snow, and the nameless weight of eternity.

It's history in an instant; it's about time, near and distant; it's about personal loss and decay; it's about change and it's about irrelevance, not just the irrelevance of the past but the irrelevance of a possible future. What does fate have waiting for Comrade Ryzhik?

As a novel *Conquered City* is a bit like a painting, impressionist and expressionist at one and the same time. There is no central focus. Rather we move from episode to episode, looking at developments from within and without, caught in the currents and cross-currents of events, dipping in and out of the lives of others, lives within lives, marionettes on the stage of history. "The personal life is dead in Russia. History has killed it", some lines I remember from *Doctor Zhivago*. There is no personal life in Serge's Petrograd; history, and the CHEKA, the first manifestation of the Soviet secret police, are killing it in starvation and terror. Perfection cannot be shaped by ugliness and squalor.

This is an honest novel. Serge's virtue would almost certainly have led to his death in Stalin's Great Terror, the sum of all of the little terrors that had gone before, but for his international reputation. Already a *persona non grata*, he was allowed to leave Russia before the real horror began. As it was he was pursued to the end of his days by the agents of a Revolution that had corrupted beyond recall. There are other novels of Serge's I've still to read, better perhaps, so *Conquered City* may not stand as his final testament. It's a commendable one, notwithstanding.

We conquered everything and everything slipped out of our grasp. We have conquered bread and there is famine. We have declared peace to a war-weary world, and war has moved into every house. We have proclaimed the liberation of men, and we need prisons, an iron discipline – yes, to pour our human weakness into brazen moulds in order to accomplish what is perhaps beyond our strength – and we are the bringers of dictatorship. We have proclaimed fraternity, but it is "fraternity and death" in reality. We have founded the Republic of Labour, and the factories are dying, grass is growing in their yards. We wanted each to give according to his needs; and here we are, privileged in the middle of generalised misery, since we are less hungry than others!

Kevin says

Conquered City is part three of the 'Victory in Defeat, Defeat in Victory' cycle that Serge wrote detailing in a semi-autobiographical way his experiences of being incarcerated just before the outbreak of WW1, taking part in the Barcelona uprising of 1917 and his eventual journey across a war-torn Europe and into Russia after the Revolution that had occurred there in 1917, being exchanged (as he was a political prisoner) for ex-

Tsarist hostages.

St.Petersburg is the conquered city in question. As my 'Birth of our Power' review starts to explain, this is a city, having been the central place during the Russian Revolution, that is now suffering from starvation and extreme poverty due to the Civil War that tried to wrestle back control of Russia from the Bolsheviks during 1918-1922. Lyrically and descriptively portrayed, this once grand city is now in ruins, a shadow of its former proud self; its former rulers and aristocrats (the ex-bourgeoisie) now on the streets selling their remaining jewels for a few more pounds of rations and so on. A city starving, beginning to sound emaciated with floorboards from old Tsarist buildings being ripped up for fuel, no electricity as there was no power - even the chimney stacks from the factories were 'silent'. Serge describes this all too well and, ironically, the same was written by other writers about St.Petersburg only about ten or twelve years after he wrote this novel (he wrote the book between 1930-31) during the Nazi siege of Leningrad during WW2, but that is another story.

What the novels main focus is about however, is the CHEKA - the early Bolshevik secret police. Dissident suppression being its key role, and the dissidents being other left-wing organisations, speculators, sections of the old bourgeoisie et al. Most end up being killed. Serge, through his characters discourse throughout the book have conversations regarding just how far you would go to make sure the revolution survived; do the ends really justify the means, no matter how bloody they turn out to be? Surely if the revolution failed, that would be better to go down in the history books as something that had been attempted, an attempt to make a workers revolution rather than turning it into something else which would be anathema to the high hopes and beliefs that what the Bolsheviks believed they were doing was right in the first instance? If anything you take away from reading this book it must be just how close the revolution came to floundering, how close the Whites were in winning, just how impoverished Russia had become detailing the excesses of grain requisitioning, the barbarity amongst the civilians selling anything to gain an extra loaf of black bread or sugar, and just how murderous and hypocritical the CHEKA were - seemingly at odds with anything the revolution preached about fraternity and humanity.

Conquered City is a book written openly and honestly about the excesses committed in the name of Socialism, or rather just how far should you go in order to win, no matter the consequences in achieving that aim. It also shows a rising bureaucracy being formed amongst the Bolshevik State apparatus, an increasing paranoia that enemies had to be killed even if they just held liberal views. There are both internal (Left-Social Revolutionaries, Mensheviks, Anarchists) and external threats (the White armies) threatening the revolution and brutal force against them, creating the 'Terror', seemed the only way of surviving. If that was right, and Serge seems to muse on this point via his characters, then it is open to interpretation.

Steve Mayer says

I've wanted to read Victor Serge for a long time--he was an intellectual hero of one of my intellectual heroes, Dwight MacDonald. But this may not be the place to begin. It's a bleak, unsparing look at Leningrad in the midst of the Russian Civil War, circa 1919-20. Terror and abject poverty abound, and the workers who made the revolution understandably wonder--as did the soldiers in Cromwell's army (see The Putney Debates or Light Shining in Buckinghamshire)--what they got out of it. It's a wonder that Serge kept his faith in revolution and socialism intact. Perhaps his memoir explains how. But the only people who are admirable in this book wind up . . .

Petter Nordal says

Serge was there. It's one thing to read historic accounts based on documentary evidence, but sometimes reading an account by a participant who cared, lost and survived is more immediate.

Rick says

Conquered City is a novel of the Russian civil war between the Reds and Whites after the Russian Revolution. Serge, a participant in the civil war on the side of the Reds, wrote his novel at the start of the 1930s. He'd been arrested by Stalin's secret police in the late 20s and had later been Stalin's guest in the Gulag until influential French communists protested his arrest. Reluctantly released, Serge was a non-person but, helped by his prison experiences (in a variety of countries and on order of a variety of regimes, mostly right but, thanks to Stalin, left as well), managed to write surreptitiously and despite the distractions of menacing supervision. Serge was a lifelong radical, born of anti-Czarist radicals, and lived much of his life in exile (dying in Mexico in 1947).

Petersburg, not yet Leningrad, is embattled as the novel begins and Serge introduces a variety of characters in a largely third person but periodically first person narrative. Some are Reds, some Whites. But there are Greens, socialists, anarchists, monarchists, criminals, and many, many none of the above—peasants and workers who care about bread but not politics. The civil war, following on a world war and a revolution, has disrupted life to the point of ruin. Any act or non-act can lead to death. A boy stealing firewood to keep his family from freezing falls through a hole in the river ice and disappears forever. A member of a special committee helps his girlfriend's brother get out of prison and is executed for corruption. A zealous soldier gets two in her belly on a contraband raid and dies. One True Believer says, "I'm optimistic for the long run; as for the present, I have my doubts, I'm even pessimistic." A character observes, "They don't know history, but they are making it."

Atrocities abound. Mass executions. Pogroms. Betrayals. A character is told, to temper the bleakness that abounds and that not only reflects the likelihood of immediate personal doom but that gives license to do whatever is necessary, regardless of its brutality or inhumanity, "you are right to believe in the future. It is the new God." The Party members believe they will prevail, though most believe that they will either die in the armed struggle or take their own turn before the firing squads. They cling to a vision of a perfect society of peace and equality that awaits generations in the future even as they help build a society without mercy, one purged of expertise in industry and agriculture but sustained by the holdover expertise of the czar's prison guards and secret police.

The novel covers a year of the civil war and begins and ends with scenes that echo one another, in part the echo is word for word. Ryzhik is at his desk, fighting to stay awake, there is no triumph or change. Only weariness and more to be done in service to a growing lie. "Snow covered the fresh graves which were already half-forgotten. Life is for the living and they have trouble staying alive." Serge's austere prose style has a grim elegance, a tragic beauty that is hard to resist. "Crystal-like bells continued to jingle in the distance, far off. Ryzhik said aloud the three magic words, 'It is necessary. It is necessary. It is necessary.' The bells covered them. It is necessary. It is necessary... The world was empty like a great glass bell." His independence and dedication to truth is admirable beyond words, given the millions that Stalinism

imprisoned and murdered within and beyond his borders. Conquered City is powerful, starkly beautiful and heroic.

Bruce Crown says

This is a great episodic book, albeit difficult to understand unless you are a Russian Culture student or interested in Russian History (or a general historian). As it depicts the fall of the city of St. Petersburg in the revolution of 1917 at the turn of the war, little tidbits of history are prevalent throughout. Reading it now, we find some major ideological developments, this revolution caused the rise of fascism and Stalinism, culminating in the Cold War. At its apex, we find why Russian government officials loathe western life. That hatred, like all other veils of power, is a mask that justifies the eternal political power struggle between élites, and oppressive lengths every class will go to in order to perpetuate their power once they attain it, coupled with the unflinching utilization of blood to retain said power. **The workers want bread, peace, and freedom** hangs over the counter at a bakery where charred hands stretch out for stale black bread. Blood is spilled, great cities destroyed and pillage; nothing changes. Power is power. And those in power will do whatever they have to, to keep it or acquire it.

This is where Serge's brilliance comes in:

Unlike Solzhenitzyn, whose view of the capitalist West seems to have been formed by a simple process of inversion-a cynically naive reversal of Russian "anti-capitalist" propaganda-Serge had grown up in the slums of London and Brussels and seen a brother die of starvation and neglect. **Serge knew both worlds intimately.** ~ *From the foreword.*

They believe the working classes are perpetually taken advantage of (this is true of course), but this is not a byproduct of capitalism but greed. The only freedom for the workers is to die a slow death. Of course Serge doesn't yet know that this is precisely what happens to his beloved Russia. Nevertheless this is a great edition. The translation is great and the gloss of the sentences retain their original panache.

Chaliapin appeared in tails and white gloves, just as he had before the Emperor not long ago, greeting this audience as he had the other (the audience which had passed before the firing squad) with a deep bow and the smile of a masterful charmer. Voices cracked through the hall: 'The Knout! The Knout!' Love songs are beautiful, doubtless, but what this audience, this army crowded into a concert hall, likes is The Song of the Knout. They know the knout. Its taste on your back, its taste across your face; and also how to apply the knout, the capitalists know a few things about that! Sing us that one, comrade, and you'll hear bravos the like of which that other hall-the one that will never return, the one you miss perhaps deep down in your soul, the other hall with its low-cut dresses and its monocles-never gave you! Hands which have moved stones, earth, manure, metals, fire, and blood will applaud you (And the pedect voice sang out The Song of the Knout. That's a song, brothers!

It is sometimes difficult to keep track of where characters are in the narrative due to both the required

familiarity with Russian culture and the episodic nature of the book; I am not that familiar with Russian culture outside of literature, and thus it is difficult to keep track of characters' names. Especially names with completely unrelated nicknames in moments where Serge switches between them, sometimes mid conversation. The plot is simple as a reflection of the extremely dense and complicated issues at work. I recommend this work to anyone, along with *Midnight in the Century* and *Unforgiving Years* who is interested in Russian history, and how we ended up where we are now in the current political scene.

Feliks says

I'm overhauling my initially positive review, for the novel alters very gravely in quality, approximately 1/3 through its length.

This odd little work started out alright. It is a slim volume representing a behind-the-scenes view of the sprawling brigandry and savagery as Kerensky's provisional government battled the first people's Soviet, and the martial law which swept the city.

At first, Serge seems to possess a simple, light, and often poetic touch. He demonstrates an eye for detail, for colorful imagery--'glittering snow'... 'brooding rooftops', etc etc etc. But this fount quickly runs dry as other aspects of his prose come to the fore.

There are a set of incompatible goals hashed together in this tale. Graphic bits of concrete, immediate action (one citizen's search for firewood, or another comrade's search for a greatcoat) is interspersed --to very poor effect, I might add--with choppy, personal, inward "musings about the revolutionary process".

It happens increasingly throughout the read. A true case of 'bait-and-switch'. In this book, any character might suddenly halt all his other concerns to strike up a pose, and parrot out a series of rhetorical arguments clearly advanced by Serge himself. This then might be followed by a chapter of the author's own commentary; (very dry and pedantic, as well as vague/airy).

In another chapter, we could (if we're lucky) observe some more action, but then in any chapter which follows on the heels of that, we might easily discover two wholly new characters engaged in a revolutionary dialog, (abstract political debate so artificial and phony that no two people would ever engage in it, were the tale drawn from real life). Such speeches might only be found in correspondence of that era, perhaps. Serge simply writes without any kind of rectitude or discipline. He spews out a jumble.

As the strange narrative draws to a close, none of the characters even seem connected by the plot they are supposed to inhabit. The resolution of the plot doesn't dawn on the very characters involved in the story.

Even if all this were intended--it is done badly. Peering closely at what Serge set out to do--trying to identify some rhyme-or-reason--I suppose the author is attempting to show that as befalls his characters--some sort of 'divine hand of revolutionary justice' intervened in their lives, dealt them their fates, and disposed of their dreams according to the merit of their revolutionary beliefs. There's a lot of prattle about 'pure motives', after all.

But it's simply one of the most nonsensical works I've ever had come my way. I read a lot of authentic revolutionary literature and this agglomeration does no one from that timeperiod, any justice whatsoever in conveying their noble causes.

If--as the cover blurb suggests--Victor Serge is 'the only novelist able to evoke those pre-revolutionary, anarchist years' (immediately before and after the events of 1905) then that is a sorry statement indeed.

I suggest instead one turn to the superb novels of Solzhenitsyn, or else go back further to Dostoevsky, try 'The Secret Agent' by Conrad, or some works of GK Chesterton; or even some of the novels which influenced Lenin himself.

Jim says

Victor Serge is virtually unknown in the West, and that is a shame. Born in Brussels, Serge was a Communist Revolutionary who saw action during the Revolution. *Conquered City* is about the years 1919-1920, when the Bolsheviks have largely prevailed but are being assailed from within by Mensheviks and Left SR's and from without by the White Russian armies financed by the Western powers.

Conquered City skips around from one set of revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries to another. Although some sections are first person narratives, it is not always easy to know who is speaking. The book is, however, a powerful study of cynicism tempered by starvation. The hero is Petrograd itself, which was at the time threatened from the West by a White army.

Several years ago, I read Serge's **The Case of Comrade Tularev**, which I found to be one of the best, if not the best, fiction relating to Stalin's purges. (Anatoli Rybakov's *Arbat* trilogy is another candidate.)

Both books showed Serge to be a superb, if unsung, novelist. He wrote in French. In Russia, he quickly came into conflict with Stalin and was imprisoned by him. It was the pleading of Western writers which led the Chekhists to release him. Like Trotsky, he died in exile in Mexico, though, unlike Trotsky, of a natural death.

Daniel Polansky says

holy shit, this was a book. Victor Serge was the child of Anarchist revolutionaries who fought with the Reds in the Russian Civil War before breaking with Stalin and dying penniless and basically forgotten in Mexico. This story of the attempt of the Red Army to fend off the White in St. Petersburg in 1919 is fabulously good. With blistering if difficult prose he describes the thought processes of a menagerie of different characters on both sides of the struggle, die-hard Soviet Partisans and White Army hold-outs, peasants and prostitutes and bandits, all well-realized and clearly drawn from the author's own experience in the conflict. Excellent, all around. Were there sword fights? No, but there was a brief knife fight which I thought was done well.

Janet says

This is a round robin of voices and lives in the Civil War period in Petrograd following the Revolution, recognizable political leaders, representative types, it hits the high (and low) points, the great suffering of the

working class and the even greater suffering of the non-proletariat, the terrible shortages, the ironic full circle suffered by the Special Commission (CHeKa) is especially premonitory of the Stalinist purges. But as a novel per se, the book suffers the fate of many books written without a clear protagonist--you never surmount a certain distance from the events. However, the perspectives and events really cover the range--the characterizations are painted with a lively quick brush, the feel of Petersburg is gorgeous for such a short book. I've read Serge's "the Year One of the Revolution" and thought it was actually more engaging, but this will be more suitable for people just coming to the literature of the Russian Revolution.

three stars for novel qua novel, but four for the extraordinary unflinching courage of it.

Sunjay says

A rather bland depiction of St. Petersburg during the Civil War. Yeah, bad stuff happens to good people, but Serge is still fixated on the general idea of socialism as a good thing, and therefore he equivocates. Rather than railing against the system (like Koestler or Solzhenitsyn), he rails against greedy bureaucrats, lazy workers, and spineless party members unable to stand up for what they believe in. In the end perhaps Serge's nuanced approach is more correct, but it doesn't make for good reading.

J. says

"...workers are changing the world, just as they demolish, build, forge, throw bridges across rivers. We will throw a bridge from one universe to the other. Over there: the black and yellow peoples, the brown peoples, the enslaved peoples ..

Words no longer followed her thoughts in their ineffable flight. The shimmering crosses of the churches attracted her eyes. Old faith, we will break you too. We will take the crucified one down off the cross. We want people to forget him. No more symbols of humiliation and suffering on the earth, no more blindness; knowledge, the clear eye of man, the master of himself and of things, rediscovering the universe afresh.

From the mouth of a pink street surged trucks, bristling with bayonets. They came bounding out, shaking the ground, jolting and pitching, over the broken pavement ..."

Conquered City tells the story of the prototypical players in the siege of St. Petersburg in 1919. It is a fictional account of the story, written by Victor Serge, himself a witness. Told through direct quote, hearsay, confession, declamation, remembrance and interior monologue, by a gallery of other witnesses. Each is poignant, direct, convincing, and true for the moment-- but the truth is that many of these identities and narrative positions are subject to change. Abrupt change or revision, at the mercy of the events of the day.

A political stance, a moral conviction, a genuine human connection-- all may be sold out to the swings and shifts of the Revolution. No one can be relied upon, and what is true earlier in the week will have changed by the weekend; spies and executions are routine, but the charges may be cooked. The greater-good being used at every stage, whether for good or ill. All of the most perilous kinds of slippery slope there can possibly be. And yet, someone had to witness it, and somehow get it down so that it might be examined later.

There is much to be said about the structure of this book, which might be said to be portmanteau or

haphazard, at least until the final chapters when the weight of what is happening bears down on the frame of the narrative. Absolute chaos arrives at the next tick of the clock.

Author Serge wrote the account(s) here from exile throughout the twenties, hounded by the Soviet secret police from country to country. So it is necessarily compartmentalized, densely episodic, but also -- unified. It is the resolution of millions of disparate elements that makes this so impressive.

What must be said is that the Foreword in the Nyrb edition is a glowingly successful example of a well-researched, insightful, Afterword. (There seems little appetite these days to put any 'extras' in books at the end, when they would make sense, when the reader can fully absorb the scholarship at hand. To place this before the text is to mystify a lot of readers, and to place a barrier before almost all excepting the specialist.)

Translator Richard Greeman is an authority on the work of Victor Serge, and the Foreword is comprehensive and thorough, answering a lot of questions that come up over the course of what is a thin (198pp) but richly condensed text. Much of the wide frame of action and political thought that comprises the book is examined, questions answered and discussed, in the Foreword. But save it for an Afterword and dive right in at the deep end. *Conquered City* is no dusty historical allegory; the history is in brilliant period technicolor, and the themes are still with us in every day's news.

"Dostoevsky..." began Platon Nikolaevich.

"I don't read him. No time, you understand. The Karamazovs split hairs with their beautiful souls; we are carving flesh itself, and the beautiful soul doesn't mean a damn thing to us. What is serious is to eat, to sleep, to avoid being killed, and to kill well. There's the truth. The question has already been decided by the sword and the spirit. A sword which is stronger than ours, a spirit we don't understand. And we don't need to understand, in order to perish. We will all perish with these books, these ideas, Dostoevsky and the rest; precisely, perhaps, on account of these books, of these ideas, of Dostoevsky, of scruples, and of incomplete massacres. And the earth will continue to turn. That's all. Good evening."

The days got longer, heralding white nights. The snow melted on the steppes, revealing patches of black earth and pointed yellow grasses. Streamlets ran in every direction, babbling like birds. They glistened in every fold of earth. Swollen rivers reflected pure skies of still frigid blue. Scattered bursts of laughter hung in the woods among the slim white trunks of birches. Specks of dull silver seemed to hang in the air. The first warm days were tender, caressing...

Jim says

"The Party is becoming contaminated, you say? It's inevitable. Remember the entrance of the anarchists into Ekaterinoslav? They aware carrying a big black banner with these words: 'Poison is More Deadly than Power!' That's pretty true. It's also a poison we need." p137

This astonishing, claustrophobic account of Leningrad (rather, Petrograd) under the tenuous rule of the

Bolsheviks and the terror they employed, while under siege by the Whites, written by someone who was there (and who remained a thorn in Stalin's side). It's a number of short accounts of wildly different people (many of whom are unified in a coldly brutal way in the end) caught up in the crushing dialectic of history and the violence and starvation that the Red leaders are constantly justifying to themselves, and to others, that just one more day of hell and history will be conquered for future generations, that "it is to end war forever that we are fighting". In reading this, it's easier to understand on a human level the paranoid brutality of the Soviet regime, which was born clinging to power with the whole world against it. (I say that while still wishing that Mannheim had intervened!) A great account of intellectual hubris and of human suffering that is beautifully written with sad awareness of what the ultimate outcome was. Oh, those poor Russians:

"The Timochkas, the Matvvis, the Ivans are perfectly right, poor souls, not to want to fight any more. It is their Revolution that we are making; it is to end war forever that we are fighting, that their blood must still flow. They suffer, they want to live, they have their eyes wide open and can't see what human necessity makes them bow down. We see for them, but the law is too hard, they rebel against us, they flee. Their weakness turns against them. (Thus, in Leonid Andreev's play, crowned Hunger, who reigns over the poor, pushes the plebs to revolt, then betrays them and bows down to the rich, of which she is always in any case their servant.) The Ivans don't know what history is. Nonetheless history pushes them forward, drags them along, grinds them down, pulls them by the millions out of their teached huts to the sound of the tocsin, of mobilizationns, piles them into cattle cars, puts repeating rifles into their hands (hands which guided wooden plows or turned over haystacks with slow movements consecrated since the peopling of Eurasia), throws these human masses against Europe in Prussia, against Asia in Armenia, parades them through french port towns and scatters their bones in champagne, lines them up -- Ivan, Matvei, Timochka -- alongside helmeted Senegalese, turbanned Sikhs, and Tommies with pipes in their teeth, against methodical Germans whose leaders are all doctors and who go into battle wearing piglike masks preceded by waves of gas... who will save them if they don't save themselves? Who will guide them if not us? Tomorrow, if we are defeated, they will become brutes again. They will give back the land. They will be hanged, whipped, and mobilized. Newspapers and schools will be founded to teach them that such is the eternal law. They will be lined up, like mechanical soldiers, in the squares of workers' cities, and when the red flags appear the Ivans will shoot. -- The will shoot at us, who are them. p 117-8

"Dostoyevsky..." began Platon Nikolaevich.

"I don't read him. No time, you understand. The Karamazovs split hairs with their beautiful souls; we are carving flesh itself, and the beautiful soul doesn't mean a damn thing to us. What is serious is to eat, to sleep, to avoid being killed, and to kill well. There's the truth. The question has already been decided by the sword and the spirit. A sword which is stronger than ours, a spirit we don't understand. And we don't need to understand in order to perish. We will all perish with these books, these ideas, Dostoyevsky and the rest; precisely, perhaps, on account of these books, of these ideas, or Dostoyevsky, or scruples, and of incomplete massacres. And the Earth will continue to turn. That's all. Good evening." p 104

Eric says

An excellent, multi-voiced account of St. Petersburg in 1919, Conquered City uses an episodic approach borne out of Mr. Serge's circumstances at the time the novel was written to paint a picture of a city

collapsing under its own weight. Characters are deftly drawn, and Mr. Serge's voice is, as ever, taut and somewhat oblique, throwing you into the fire and forcing you to draw out the significance of each episode. This is an entertaining but inconsistent read, and falters a little toward the end, mostly under the weight of the mood of the narrative, which is, of course, a downer. I recommend this book, but would start with *The Case of Comrade Tulayev* and *Unforgiving Years*, which are both superior.

Lauren Strickland says

Inspiring, beautifully written, a work with enviable experimental form. Composed in fragments and therefore easy - pleasurable - to dip in and out of; a prime example of modernist literature, therefore hard to read tiredly, or without your full attention. An interesting literary and historical curiosity (and I mean this as a sincere, not at all dismissive, compliment).

Ray Hartley says

Petrograd (cf. St Petersburg, Leningrad) finds itself at the center of the post Russian revolution civil war. Bandits, thugs and looters associate themselves with whichever side is in ascendancy as the germinating security state begins the grim task of deciding who should live or die in the name of progress. Its officials find themselves seeking out the traitors as part of the Special Commission, the precursor to Stalin's Cheka. For its chilling account of how ordinary well-meaning people turn into the tools of a brutal bureaucracy alone, this is a masterpiece. What pushes it into five-star territory is Serge's beautiful prose as he casts the frost of winter over his bleak story.

Hadrian says

"All this beauty was perhaps the sign of our death. Not a single chimney was smoking. The city was thus dying. And, like shipwrecked men on a raft devouring each other, we were about to fight among ourselves, workers against workers, revolutionaries against revolutionaries."

Serge here writes on the besieged city of St. Petersburg, or Leningrad, or Petrograd. Although there is technically a main plot line, his approach to it is more episodic, a portrait of the city as much as it is of the characters themselves. We see the huddled factory workers, the soldiers, the spies, the smugglers, the naive, the rump parliament.

The novel is a story of when the rhetoric of revolution meets the hard brutality of war. Serge already sees the germs of what would destroy his revolution - the 'necessity' of violent purges, the rise of the secret police, the suspicion and destruction of outsiders. And all of this was written before Stalin.

I'll let the book speak for itself. Here's another quote.

"We have conquered everything and everything has slipped out of our grasp. We have conquered bread, and there is famine. We have declared peace to a war-weary world, and war has moved into every house. We have proclaimed the liberation of men, and we need prisons, an "iron" discipline — yes, to pour our human weakness into brazen molds in order to accomplish what is perhaps beyond our strength — and we are the

bringers of dictatorship. We have proclaimed fraternity, but it is "fraternity and death" in reality. We have founded the Republic of Labor, and the factories are dying, grass is growing in their yards. We wanted to give according to his strength and each to receive according to his needs; and here we are, privileged in the middle of generalized misery, since we are less hungry than others!"

Linda says

Victor Serge's *Conquered City* is an extraordinary novel in every sense. It captures the period of one year in the Russian revolution, when the revolutionaries are in control of St. Petersburg (or, rather, Petrograd) and have begun a period of purges, reprisals, and terror. It is impressionistic, episodic, and truly a communist story, in its root meaning of communal. It is not an individual person's story, but rather a story, told through glimpses of dozens of different lives, of both a people and an idea in a particular moment in history. In Serge's novel, the revolution itself is the main character, a strange, amorphous but unitary creature -- at once rough beast, fighting out of instinct and elemental need, and political-philosophical being, pressing onward through exceptional, sometimes nightmarish, times, driven by a deliberate consciousness of a higher purpose, an intellectually cohesive and morally justified imperative.

Born in Brussels in 1890, a child of Russian exiles, Victor Serge participated in anarchist movements in both France (where he was jailed for several years) and Spain. In 1919, he traveled to Russia to join the revolution. His fortunes in Russia rose and fell with his degree of agreement with the Soviet political establishment. He was expelled from the Party in 1928 and later imprisoned, and eventually permitted to leave the Soviet Union. *Conquered City*, written in 1931 in quick succession after two other revolutionary-themed novels, is a reflection of what he witnessed during the civil war in St. Petersburg.

The New York Review of Books Classics edition of *Conquered City* includes a foreword by translator Richard Greeman which illuminates the novel a great deal, providing important context. For example, this excerpt from the foreword quotes Serge to describe both his primary thematic interest in writing the book, and his conscious aim to create a narrative greater than any one character:

"His goal in writing *Conquered City*, he wrote to [French author Marcel] Martinet in 1930, was to 'reconstitute with the greatest accuracy and precision the atmosphere of one period of the Russian Revolution. . . . In [*Conquered City*], I would like to dramatize the conflict of that power grappling with history and itself -- and victorious.' Serge went on to outline for Martinet his plan for this new novel which he believes will be 'radically different' in its form compared to

'any I have read. . . . It will have a sort of plot, central if you will, but like a narrow thread running through a complicated design. . . . It is not a novel of handful of people but that of a city, which is itself a moment and a fragment of the revolution. I keep rather close to history -- without writing history -- and chronicle, but above all concerned with showing the men who make events and who are carried away by events. From this standpoint, the characters have but a subaltern importance, they appear and disappear as they do in the city without occupying the center of the stage for more than a few instants.'"

Serge's work has been largely unknown until recently, but the NYRB Classics series has brought him a new world of readers. Greeman's foreword notes that as a Russian writer who published most of his work in Paris, Serge embodied a dual cultural perspective. Greeman adds, "Ironically, Serge's literary cosmopolitanism and Marxist internationalism has prevented him from being domesticated into the university, where departments

are divided into national literatures like Russian and French, both of which apparently ignore his work." I can attest to this personally. I have a Masters degree in Russian literature, with a particular interest in early 20th work, and yet I had never heard of Victor Serge before a friend introduced me to this novel.

Serge's work stands out among other fictional accounts of the revolution. He was committed to the revolution and remained dedicated to its ideals, but was not blind to its contradictions and excesses. The revolution's young idealists often wound up either corrupted by the regime or disenchanted by it, resulting in a literature that either falsely idealizes the revolution, or rejects and condemns it completely. But this piece occupies an unusual middle ground, providing a refreshingly multi-layered picture that encompasses both the hope and the tragedy of the revolution, seen through the eyes of a true believer. Serge's point is that within its own success, the revolution carried its own demise. In remaking society, it remade itself, purging the contaminating elements within itself and in the process becoming many of the very things it fought against.

Beyond the politics, the novel impresses stylistically and narratively. It is filled with deeply evocative images and passages too numerous to count, which convey a full atmosphere of advance, defeat, struggle, hope, resignation and acceptance in the smallest detail. For example: looking out over a still, clear winter morning panorama of the city, at a time when shortages, hunger, and industrial collapse pervade the city, a character observes, "All this beauty was perhaps the sign of our death. Not a single chimney was smoking. The city was thus dying." (p. 57)

Elsewhere, an official of the new regime reflects on having been stopped and questioned by a sentry guarding a woodpile, and voices his discomfort with his own relative privilege, and its contradictory necessity:

"He had taken me for another wood thief at first. I could have been one. People steal the wood that belongs to everyone, in order to live. Fire is life, like bread. But I belong to the ruling party and I am 'responsible,' to use the accepted term, that is to say, when all is said and done, in command. My ration of warmth and bread is a little more secure, a little larger. And this is unjust. I know it. And I take it. It is necessary to live in order to conquer; and not for me, for the Revolution." (p. 35)

Also, true to Serge's intent, while the barest outline of a plot can be discerned among the details, it is not nearly the most important focus of the story. The reader is carried along from chapter to chapter, peeking into rooms and lives that sometimes also bounce tangentially off one another, deflecting the narrative into another room, another scene, another story. Many characters' lives intersect, usually unbeknownst to the characters themselves. Sometimes fates of parties with quite opposing motives and loyalties mirror each other in their crises, if not their intent. Often, the story throws the reader from the end of one chapter into the middle of an unrelated conversation or action in progress at the beginning of the next, leaving the reader to orient herself to the new surroundings and events. And in the end, the entire novel seems to fold back on itself, completing its year-long journey on a night that is almost a perfect stylistic echo of the opening night, which at the same time, it clearly does not parallel in action.

The effect of all this is powerful, an aesthetically complex story that conveys the paradoxical reality of the social and political revolution, communicating the principled idealism that drove it, as well as the individual hardship that it caused.

Eva D. says

This is a chilling exploration of the problems inherent in utopian ideologies (specifically, the Bolshevik ones). The more of Victor Serge I read, the more I love him. The man has an absolutely incredible biography -- he was constantly on the run or in prison, and always reading and writing. Most of his writing is an attempt to work through the problem of bringing about social revolution...the motivations, the discipline necessary, the sacrifice behind it all. This particular title is from his revolution cycle, which deals chiefly with the Russian Civil War. It's got a bunch of quotes like the following:

"If the human species could achieve a collective sensibility for five minutes, it would either be cured or drop dead on the spot."

"The most important thing is to make ourselves useful: to do what must be done...All weapons are good. Don't take me literally: all weapons are not good at every moment. All means do not lead to an end; an end demands specific means; the choice of weapons depends on the objectives of the struggle."

"What a dead thing we have made of history in our libraries! We looked for the explanation of the present in the past. It's the present which explains the past. Real history will be written when men's eyes are open."

The book is definitely fiction, but it's based on events Serge lived through (hell, he even makes a cameo appearance among the agitators). It makes it clear just how much some people struggled with the idea of social upheaval. Also, above all, Serge's prose and his descriptions of Leningrad/Petrograd/St. Petersburg (whatever you want to call it) are gorgeous. Just check out the opening lines, describing the bleakness that is Petersburg winter:

"The long nights seemed reluctant to abandon the city. For a few hours each day, a gray light of dawn or dusk filtered through the dirty white cloud ceiling and spread over things like the dim reflection of a distant glacier. Even the snow, which continued to fall, lacked brightness. This white, silent, weightless shroud stretched out to infinity in time and space. By three in the afternoon it was already necessary to light the lamps. Evening darkened the snow with hues of ash, deep blue, and the stubborn gray of old stones. Night took over, inexorable and calm: unreal. In the darkness the delta reverted to its geographical configurations. Dark cliffs of stone cut at right angles lined the frozen canals. A kind of dark phosphorescence emanated from the broad river of ice."

Okay, it's bleak. But you cannot deny that it's beautiful.

Just...

GO READ SOME SERGE. He needs more attention in this world. Seriously. Although he's Russian, he wrote in French. No foreign language literature departments teach him.
