

"The Ardent Voyage": The Struggle of the French Communist Opposition,
1920-1938

by

Katherine Sara Boyce-Jacino
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For me, learning was not separate from life, it was life itself.
-Victor Serge, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*

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INTRODUCTION

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The Forgotten Movement

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The role of the intellectual in the communist movement has always been a topic of considerable debate. "The intellectual has his place in the worker's revolution movement," wrote Victor Serge in a 1929 pamphlet, *Vie des Révolutionnaires* (Lives of the Revolutionaries):

... a place of the first rank: on the condition that he break away, without looking back, from the class from which he came, be it bourgeois or petit-bourgeois; that he become a true *revolutionary*, that he help the proletariat party in every circumstance, because for revolutionaries it is never a question of *helping oneself* to the party.¹

Despite, or perhaps because of, the requirement of breaking away "from the class from which [they] came," many intellectuals flocked to the Communist Party, believing part of the duty of a class-conscious, enlightened intellectual was to "liberate the unenlightened."² In spite of their hopeful enthusiasm, intellectuals often encountered enormous resistance from those within the Party who found intellectualism incompatible with communism. Nowhere was this struggle more pervasive than in France, where the Communists struggled to balance France's impressive cultural heritage with the anti-intellectual bent of the Communist guidelines outlined by the Soviet Union after the 1917 October Revolution in Russia.

¹ Victor Serge, "Vie des Révolutionnaires," Pamphlet. n.d. [1929?]. Library of Social History Collection, Box 68, Folder 13 (Pamphlets), Hoover Institution Library, 12.

² David Caute, *Communism and the French Intellectuals: 1914-1960* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1964), 77.

This conflict is most evident in two purges that occurred early in the French Communist Party's life. The first occurred in 1923, when a group of intellectuals within the Party opposed Lenin's United Front policy. The policy required all Communist Parties to forge alliances with less radical leftist groups who were more popular among the proletariat, such as the socialists, in an effort to attract more of the working class to communism. Many intellectuals in the French Party found this suggestion repulsive, and as a result were purged from the Party ranks.

The second purge began in the summer of 1924, when a prominent French communist, Boris Souvarine, was "publicly crushed" and subsequently expelled from the party in front of a commission of inquiry at the Fifth Congress of the Communist International in July 1924.³ Souvarine had already been removed as editor of the *Bulletin Communiste*, the official organ of the French Communist Party in March, for publishing "personal and hostile polemics" against the head of the Party, Albert Treint.⁴ Souvarine was also criticized for publishing Trotsky's works who by then was decidedly out of favor with the Soviet Party.

Souvarine's expulsion instigated an exodus of other intellectuals from the Party, including Magdeleine Paz and Alfred Rosmer. As the expulsions continued through the end of 1924, the newly expelled communists began to assemble a Communist Opposition movement.

³ Cauter, *Communism and the French Intellectuals, 1914-1960*, 89.

⁴ Secretariat of the French Party, "Le changement de la Direction du «Bulletin», " *Bulletin Communiste*, 21 March 1924, 309. NYPL microform. *Bulletin Communiste*, April 4, 1924, Original French: "ses polemiques personnelles et inimicales"

Many victims of the 1923 purge maintained a literary but not necessarily political lifestyle after their expulsion, the political intellectuals like Souvarine struggled to continue in a communist way outside the Party. The formation of the Opposition was an attempt to be communist without adhering to the rigid Party structure.

Intellectually, the new Opposition was an incredibly productive movement. The Oppositionists wrote an enormous amount of articles, pamphlets, letters (both private and public), and books about their political concerns. However, no meeting records, no hints at mobilization or real large-scale motivation, or any other mention of physical political activity exist. In contrast, the contemporary records of the official Party reveal a period of lively activity, full of elections, conferences, and protests.⁵

For all the intellectual production concerning politics, there is a lack of political action that might be expected to accompany it, and this is perhaps why the movement is so poorly understood today. Communist groups historically favored bold political activity such as large rallies and violent protests, but there is no mention of this to be found in the notes, journals, letters, and news publications of the French Communist Opposition. The movement has been classified rather neatly by historians, either as a failed group of bitter ex-party members, or a failed splinter group of Trotsky's broader International Left Opposition movement. Very few historians of the period even mention the movement at all. Instead of accepting this traditional framework, I would like to introduce a new lens through which to understand the French Opposition.

⁵ French Communist Party publications, available at the Hoover Institution Library.

There is clear evidence for the historiographical trend that I find problematic. The body of literature that mentions the French Opposition, which to begin with is quite small, discusses either the development of Communism in France through the Party, or the evolution of Trotskyism in France or internationally; none deal with French Opposition directly.

For example, David Caute's *Communism and the French Intellectuals, 1914-1960* describes the formation of the Communist Opposition until 1928, but does not mention the movement again, except occasionally as a synonym for "Trotskyism." He is far more concerned with the activities of intellectuals within the Party, not those who were removed from it, and sees the Opposition as an example of intellectuals who failed to operate within the Party.

Robert Wohl, in *French Communism in the Making, 1914-1924* gives a detailed description of the Opposition's first attempts at organization outside the Party, concluding that the Opposition failed in 1926 because it could not structure itself in a politically effective way.⁶ Robert J. Alexander's tome on *International Trotskyism: 1929-1985* considers the nebulous French Opposition movement as part of Trotsky's larger movement. When the French Opposition splits with Trotsky over irreconcilable ideological differences, Alexander portrays the event not as a parting of ways by two equally legitimate groups, but rather as the secession of one small group of dissenters from a larger, more legitimate political organization.⁷ Most of the other

⁶ Robert Wohl, *French Communism in the Making: 1914-1924* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1966).

⁷ Robert J. Alexander, *International Trotskyism, 1929-1985: A Documented Analysis of the Movement* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991).

references to the French Opposition are found in biographies of Trotsky, notably Pierre Broué's 1988 *Trotsky*.⁸ In *Trotsky*, Broué writes about individual members of the Opposition as though they are satellites orbiting around the Trotsky, the central star, reflecting his light but emitting none of their own.

Many of the key figures of the Opposition, such as Victor Serge, or Boris Souvarine, have been discussed outside of their activities within the French Opposition movement, mostly in reference to their literary production, but removed from the context of their political affiliations.⁹ In fact, the only work that directly addresses the French Opposition as a cohesive group is a 1973 Master's Thesis by John Paul Gerber at the University of Wisconsin, but Gerber ends his study in 1932 because the movement failed in its "established goals" and indeed was never more than "loose congeries of splinter groups."¹⁰ In general, historians have not felt a pressing need to study this movement.

Why have historians not engaged? One might ask, in the face of this dominant interpretation, why bother? Is this French Opposition really worth engaging at all? Is there something to be found, something to be gained in a closer look at this movement?

It may at first seem a useless undertaking, because the impression gained from any historical discussion about the group is that the French Communist Opposition as

⁸ Pierre Broué, *Trotsky* (Paris: Fayard, 1988).

⁹ For example, see Susan Weissman, *Victor Serge: The course is set on hope* (London: Verso, 2001) and Jean-Louis Panné, *Boris Souvarine: Le premier désenchanté du communiste* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1993).

¹⁰ John Paul Gerber, *Militants Against the Apparatus: The Communist Opposition in France, 1923-1932* (Masters Thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1973), 189-190.

a whole does not contribute much of anything to French culture or politics, and it does not seem to provide any resounding lessons for modern intellectual and political pursuits. When viewed from the dominant framework of understanding of this period, which tends to focus on the political organization of either the Party or Trotsky's Opposition, it is easy to see the French Opposition as an irrelevant group of intellectuals who failed to belong to either the Party or Trotsky's group, and who spent most of their time writing intellectual criticism for an audience that was not listening.

The stick by which we often measure political success, especially historically, measures the organization and the activity of a group. Even if the PCF is no longer a dominant force in France, one would have difficulty claiming the Party had no influence in the past. The historical measuring stick measures physical action, and this is why the French Opposition is a historical misfit. But what if we change what it measures? What if we change the standards by which we evaluate political groups, and what if we change the lens through which we view them? This changing of the lens, and the redefining of the measuring stick, can reveal hidden depths to movements we have forgotten, forcing us to ask *why* we have forgotten such groups, and making us realize why they are important to remember.

Organization

The goal of this thesis is twofold: first, to reconstruct the neglected history of the French Opposition; and second, to explore why the French Opposition's history

has been neglected, and how to reformulate our understanding of political engagement so that a group such as the Opposition is included.

This thesis is organized chronologically and thematically, focusing on four key members of the Opposition movement: Victor Serge, Boris Souvarine, Magdeleine Paz, and Alfred Rosmer. These four figures were prolific writers and prominent in the Opposition community, so using their writing as a guide has enabled me to construct a detailed history of the Opposition movement.

The first chapter highlights the search for unity in the beginning years of the French Communist Party, from its formation in 1920 to its first major internal conflict in 1923. The second chapter details the next purge of the Party, and the subsequent formation of the French Opposition. I have endeavored to show how the Opposition formed independently of both the Party and Trotsky, contrary to popular historical belief. This chapter continues the story of the Opposition beyond when most historians pronounced it dead. It shows that instead of wasting away into irrelevancy, the Opposition was actually formulating a unique form of literary politics that, far from being irrelevant, was quite meaningful. The first moment of cohesion came in 1935 when the Opposition rallied to the defense of Victor Serge, who had been imprisoned exiled in the harsh Russian steppe for almost three years. The Opposition's involvement in the "Victor Serge Affair" resulted in his successful release into Western Europe, where he joined the French Opposition.

The third chapter begins with the announcement of the first Moscow Trials, the show trials from 1936 to 1938 in which Stalin systematically executed or imprisoned every Old Bolshevik except himself and Trotsky, who remained safely in

exile. The Moscow Trials provoked protest and outrage all across Western Europe and the Americas. Several commissions of inquiry were formed, including the French *Comité pour l'enquête sur le procès de Moscou et pour la défense de la liberté d'opinion dans la révolution*. The *Comité* was formed by a group of leftist intellectuals, including Serge, Alfred Rosmer, and Magdeleine Paz. Using publications and correspondence written by these figures, I argue that, far from being extinct by 1936, the French Opposition thrived during the Moscow Trials. The Trials were a perfect moment for the Opposition's unique form of literary political engagement. In this chapter, I am particularly interested in the tangible ramifications of the Opposition's involvement in the Trials as proof of its existence.

Theoretical Frameworks

I have relied on two texts to construct my theoretical framework of analysis. First, in exploring the development of the Opposition's form of literary politics, I draw on David Carroll's *French Literary Fascism: Nationalism, Anti-Semitism, and the Ideology of Culture*.¹¹ Through the course of his argument, Carroll shows that the French literary fascists of the 1930s were the intellectual heirs of the Dreyfus affair polemic, and of a general quality of French politics and culture not be found in other countries.

The Dreyfus affair, which began with the 1894 trial of a Jewish French army officer wrongly accused of smuggling military documents to the Prussians, incited an

¹¹ David Carroll, *French Literary Fascism: Nationalism, Anti-Semitism, and the Ideology of Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

enormous amount of writing dedicated to either freeing or condemning Captain Dreyfus. Both the Dreyfusards, in favor of Dreyfus's release, and the Anti-Dreyfusards, who were opposed to it, were characterized by a flurry of political writing and literary production designed to produce political results. Often, they succeeded; writings on the Dreyfus Affair several years after the case had been considered closed helped reopen the case in court, and in the end, Dreyfus's name was cleared.

The writing of the Dreyfusards and Anti-Dreyfusards was a political statement in itself, and it had a large public audience. "The intensifying interest in the Affair took on the dimensions – at least for its most fervent partisans – of a national hysteria. Not only the popular press but commercialization of the Dreyfus Affair took place."¹² The polemic and critique of the Dreyfusards and Anti-Dreyfusards was easily accessible and widely read, and tides of public opinion helped to keep the Affair in the public eye for more than a decade. During the Dreyfus Affair, intellectual production became away to take political action.

David Carroll identifies the early hints of French fascism in some of the Anti-Dreyfusard polemic published during the affair. He focuses especially on Maurice Barrès, for whom "the importance of the Dreyfus affair ... was that it destroyed all... pretenses and identified the true, rooted nationalist French as well as the deracinated – that is, foreign – traitorous non-French French, so that the battle for France and French culture could continue openly and without the possibility of mistaking friend

¹² Leslie Derfler, *The Dreyfus Affair* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002), 3.

and foe."¹³ Carroll also considers Charles Péguy to be a father of the fascists of the 1920s and 1930s, in part because of his writings on the "*déracinés*," the "others." The origins of fascism lie in this insistence on the mythical purity of France and of the French, and any violation of this, by Jews or by other "*déracinés*" is a threat to the sanctity of France.

Carroll traces the lingering effects of the Dreyfus Affair forward into the French literary fascists, such as Lucien Rebatets and Edouard Drumont. These fascists, Carroll writes, were drawn to fascism not *even though* they were intellectuals and writers, but "*precisely because they were intellectuals and writers.*"¹⁴ For these *French* literary fascists, "political extremism and the defense of the integrity of literature and culture constitute one and the same position."¹⁵ A similar practice can be found in France as a whole, not just in its fascist wings. Carroll gives the French literary fascists a direct lineage to the Anti-Dreyfusards. There is no correspondingly clear evolution for the French Communist Opposition, but Carroll's framework of analysis is still provocative.

If we can take Carroll's framework and understanding of literary politics and apply it to the French Communist Opposition, the nature and goal of this poorly understood group becomes much clearer. It is especially useful as a reminder that, unlike what so many historians have accepted, the French Communist Opposition did not engage in production for the sake of production. Their prolific writing had a very

¹³ Carroll, *French Literary Fascism*, 29.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 8. [italics his].

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

tangible and political goal. It is not literature in lieu of politics, but literature as politics.

Carroll's argument rests on the notion that France produced an environment in which culture is political and politics are cultural, and the French Opposition, whether consciously or not, operated within that tradition. The PCF, the *Parti Communiste Français*, did not. This is not so surprising, since the PCF was designed in the image of the Soviet Party, and with the goal of following Moscow's orders as precisely as possible. The French Opposition, on the other hand, despite its continuing adherence to the theoretical tenets of communism, acted in a very French tradition.

It is not enough, however, to understand the Opposition merely as a product of French intellectual tradition. This brings me to my second frame of analysis. Martin Jay's *Marxism and Totality*, and Jay's notions that expand on Perry Anderson's *Considerations on Western Marxism*, examine a history of Western Marxism that is strikingly similar to the Communist Opposition.¹⁶ Jay's work studies the post-war Western Marxists, a group of European intellectuals including Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Henri Lefebvre, and Theodor W. Adorno, and others.¹⁷

Jay expands on an idea suggested by Anderson in his *Considerations on Western Marxism*, in which he identified a generational shift in the character of the Western Marxists. He found that the "earliest group tended to find a closer link between its theory and political practice than the later ones."¹⁸

¹⁶ Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 7.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 6. See also Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (New York: Verso, 1976).

Jay writes of the Leninist-inclined Western Marxists that "the elitist character of the Leninist party was unwittingly duplicated in the often elitist nature of their work," and they "spoke to a relatively circumscribed audience of intellectuals, or to a mass public yet to be created. Theirs was a democracy of the future, not the present."¹⁹

Jay suggests that the Western Marxists struggled with the realization that they could not link theory to practice, and that they "rarely, if ever, deluded themselves into believing that theirs was a time in which the unity of theory and practice was easily achieved."²⁰ Jay writes about Western Marxists, but is it possible such an explanation can apply to the French Opposition as well? The difference between the Western Marxists and the Communist Opposition is the degree of self-awareness that each group possessed. Both groups suffered from limited political mobility, and chose to put their resources towards intellectual production. But while the Western Marxists were aware of the difficulty of unifying their theory and their practice, the Communist Opposition acted as if it already had.

Jay's argument is useful when applied to the French Opposition. The Oppositionists turned their intellectual production into a practice itself. However, just as Carroll's argument proved insufficient, so does Jay's, because the French Communist Oppositionists were *not* Western Marxists. Jay's genealogy traces the Western Marxists back to Marx himself, and identifies the beginnings of Western Marxist thought in a group of thinkers who came to intellectual maturity in immediately-post-World War I Western Europe, including Georg Lukács and Ernst

¹⁹ Jay, *Marxism and Totality*, 12.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

Bloch.²¹ Though Western Marxists were traditionally identified by their Hegelian reading of Marx, Perry Anderson's 1976 *Considerations on Western Marxism* expanded the definition to include the "anti-Hegelian critics of Marxist Humanism."²² Understood in this way, Western Marxism is similar to, but decidedly distinct from "other Marxist traditions, such as Social Democracy, Austro-Marxism, Stalinism, Trotskyism, or Maoism."²³

The French Communist Opposition, while sharing many of the theory-praxis problems that plagued the Western Marxists, came from a different tradition. The Oppositionists inherited the theory of Marx through Lenin, and were concerned more with the unity of theoretical and practical Marxist-Leninism in modern society than with larger concerns about the Hegelian tendencies of Marx. The Oppositionists, in this sense, were far more modern than the Western Marxists, who had to look as far back as Marx himself for clues to keep their theory pure. In other respects, however, the Communist Opposition was far more conservative, because its members could not leave the confines of the Marxist-Leninist language. The Western Marxists, on the other hand, had a much broader range of motion available to them, and were not confined to a dogmatic discourse. The Oppositionists could only deviate so far before they were no longer Communist.

Despite these differences both in Carroll's argument and in Jay's, they both suggest compelling frameworks from which to view the French Communist Opposition and the development its unique brand of literary politics. With the

²¹ Jay, *Marxism and Totality*, 4.

²² *Ibid.*, 3.

²³ *Ibid.*, 4.

application of these frameworks to the history of the French Opposition that I have constructed from archival material, this thesis will explore why the French Opposition has been forgotten.

A Note on Sources and Notation

One of the difficulties that has both frustrated and inspired this work is the almost complete lack of secondary source material on the French Communist Opposition. My reliance on secondary sources is limited to the first chapter and the beginning of the second, as I tell the story of the formation of the French Communist Party and the purges that led to the formation of the French Opposition. I rely most heavily on David Cauter's *Communism and the French Intellectuals, 1914-1960*, Robert Wohl's *French Communism in the Making, 1914-1924*, and John Paul Gerber's 1973 Master's Thesis at the University of Minnesota, *Militants Against the Apparatus: The Communist Opposition in France, 1923-1932*. These have been doubly useful, because not only have they provided the story of the formation of the PCF and the French Opposition, but also because they serve as excellent examples of the problematic nature of the dominant narrative of the Opposition.

These sources become inadequate after about 1930, when they deem the Opposition a total failure. To support my claim that the Opposition persisted long after its supposed failure, I have relied entirely on primary source material, both published and archival. Victor Serge's *Memoirs of a Revolutionary* provided the foundation for my analysis. Serge was closely involved both with the Russian and French Opposition movements, which afforded him a uniquely comprehensive view of the period I have studied. It is not a view that aims to be objective, which I recognize, but his perspective has been crucial in reconstructing the history of the Opposition. I have also found Serge's collection of poems, *Resistance*, especially

powerful in formulating my argument, as they show Serge's intensely emotional connection to his work.

Serge also co-authored a retrospective of Leon Trotsky's life with Trotsky's widow Natalya Sedova, titled *The Life and Death of Leon Trotsky*. I have used this account to tell the Soviet aspect of this story. The book is narrated half by Serge, and half by Trotsky's widow, whose contributions appear in quotation marks. The book is, like Serge memoirs, told from a personal perspective, and therefore comes with a certain amount of bias, but it is a comprehensive history, told from the perspective of a French Oppositionist. The events in the Soviet Union and in France are closely connected, so it is impossible to tell the story of the French Opposition without referencing the contemporaneous events in the Soviet Union. By using Serge's *Memoirs* as well as *The Life and Death of Leon Trotsky*, I have constructed the Soviet part of this history through the lens of a French Oppositionist.

Many of the better-known primary sources in this work, such as Lenin's writings, records of Communist International (Comintern) congresses, Trotsky's published writings, and some of Boris Souvarine's articles were found on the Marxist Internet Archive, a comprehensive online database of the major Marxist writings, from Marx himself to the present day. Other published primary sources include court records from the Moscow Trials, and the record of the findings of the Dewey Commission, formed by the American Committee for the Defense of Leon Trotsky to investigate the truth of the Moscow Trial confessions.

Most of my primary sources are from the Hoover Institution Archives at the Hoover Institution in Stanford, CA. I spent a month of the summer of 2009 working

in the archives, and though I discovered many useful and inspiring materials, I realized that archives, especially those as large as the Hoover Institution Archives, are by nature somewhat perilous. The Hoover Archives are arranged by collection, and these collections may be organized by historical subject, as in the case of the French Subject Collection or the Library of Social History, or they may be centered around a particular person, such as the Boris Souvarine Papers or the enormous Leon Trotsky Collection. Others are personal collections, such as the Boris Nicolaevsky Collection, which consists of 280 series organized by topic of the material that Nicolaevsky himself collected during his decades-long career as an archivist. These are only the most significant collections of the dozens that I explored.

The archival system proved both fruitful and frustrating, as I discovered that one of the results of grouping items by topic is that often those items are collected out of context. For example, much of my discussion of the Opposition during the Moscow Trials is based on a small newspaper clipping that I discovered in the French Subject Collection, in which Alfred Rosmer and Magdeleine Paz refute accusations made against them during the Trial of the Twenty-One in March 1938. I am reasonably sure that no historian has written about this clipping, and while it has proved immensely useful for my argument, I was originally tempted to ignore it. Since the collection was organized by subject, the relevant article had been cut out of the original newspaper, leaving me with little context with which to understand the article completely. Another example is the monthly bulletin issued by the *Comité pour l'enquête sur le procès de Moscou et pour la défense de la liberté d'opinion dans la révolution*, which I found in the Dewey Commission folder in the Leon Trotsky

Collection. The French *Comité* and the American Dewey Commission were in contact, and the preserved editions of the bulletin are mostly French translations of the Dewey Commission reports, since the folder is about the Dewey Commission, not the *Comité*. It is easy to develop the impression that the *Comité* was only a French version of the Dewey Commission, and not an organization in its own right. Fortunately, with my familiarity with Serge's *Memoirs*, in which he describes the *Comité*, I was able to avoid making this erroneous assumption.

I also spent a brief amount of time at the University of California, Berkeley, Bancroft Library archives, which hold the largest collection of original *Bulletin Communiste* copies in the country. The Bancroft collection is small, however, and only contains an incomplete selection of volumes up until 1923. For the rest of the *Bulletin Communiste* editions, I went to the New York Public Library's microform office, which holds a microform roll of most of the *Bulletin Communiste* editions from 1920 to 1925.

The archival sources I have collected play a vital role in the construction of this thesis, and I have attempted to treat them with as much respect as possible. In some instances, I do not have concrete bibliographic information to offer, since the sources themselves often have no dates, or no signatures, or no indication of where they were published or how they were distributed. In these cases, I have noted in my footnote citations the information that is missing, and offer my own estimates.

A note on translations

All of my published sources are in English translation, with the exception of Pierre Broué's biography of Trotsky, Jean-Louis Panné's biography of Boris Souvarine, and Charles Jacquier's article in *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*. The majority of my archival primary sources are in French. In the body of the thesis, I use my translations of the French sources (including the published secondary sources), but I have included the original French in footnotes for reference.

On Notations

To distinguish between French language titles and English titles, or English translations of French titles, I have italicized the French titles. For example, the American Committee for the Defense of Leon Trotsky is the Committee, but I refer to the French committee of inquiry as the *Comité*. I have also chosen to capitalize certain words to denote a title. For example, I decided to capitalize "Opposition," since most of my argument is that the Opposition was a cohesive group. The capitalization of the name gives the movement a sense of cohesion. Likewise, I have capitalized "Party" to refer to the official Communist Party. "Communist" is capitalized when referring to the official Party, but is left un-capitalized when speaking of "communism" as a broader ideology. Part of the goal of this thesis is to show that it was possible to be successfully communist outside of the Communist Party, and the difference in capitalization helps to highlight the difference in meaning.

Jeune Russie
tu as terrassé le noir dragon de l'oppression;
tu as vaincu, sois saluée

— Excerpted from Henri Guillbeaux, *Du Champs des Horreurs*

Chapter 1
~
Formation, Cohesion, Compromise
~

When news of the 1917 Bolshevik October Revolution reached France, the French revolutionaries looked towards Russia and saw the realization of their dreams. In his memoirs, Victor Serge wrote of the news as receiving "a gleam of light." "This would be," he wrote, "the beginning of everything, the prodigious first day of Creation.... No more problems now about the aims of the struggle or the rules of life, for the Russian Revolution was calling from the heart of the future."¹

Others responded with equal enthusiasm. Georges Pioch praised "Sainte Révolution." Henri Barbusse, an admirer of Lenin before the Revolution, predicted that, "the Figure of Lenin will appear as a kind of Messiah."² Russia had become the new Holy Land, and many revolutionaries and leftist intellectuals, like Serge, made pilgrimages. The leftist French intellectuals were entranced by the Russian Revolution.

The 1789 French Revolution remained in the minds of French intellectuals as a beginning moment, a reference point for their modern revolutionary imagination. The memory, both real and imagined, held allure and promise as well as dangerous moral lessons. François Furet wrote that, "beginning in 1789 the obsession with origins, the underlying thread of all national history, came to be centered precisely on the Revolutionary break. ... 1789 became the birth date, the year zero of a new world

¹ Victor Serge, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary: 1901-1941*, trans. Peter Sedgwick (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 47.

² *Ibid.*, 67.

founded on equality."³ Tony Judt has suggested that, "in no other European culture were intellectuals so absorbed by the desire to position themselves in relation to a foundation myth."⁴ The French Revolution is inescapable in French memory and French history. It does not "simply 'explain' our contemporary history;" Furet wrote, "it *is* our contemporary history."⁵

By 1917, the legacy of the French Revolution had passed through the hands of the Dreyfus Affair intellectuals. The opposing sides of the Dreyfus Affair, the Dreyfusards and the Anti-Dreyfusards, represented two opposing cultural and intellectual positions. Ostensibly, the two sides debated over the innocence of Captain Alfred Dreyfus, a Jewish captain in the French army accused of treasonous dealings with the Prussians. The trial, however, became a battleground for much larger conflicts, what the socialist journalist Séverine called a "pretext for the grand combat of ideas."⁶ The actual innocence of Alfred Dreyfus was overshadowed by larger arguments about the future of French republicanism – on one side, the Dreyfusards, supporting a commitment to the republican values of truth, reason, justice, and universalism; on the other, the Anti-Dreyfusards, championing a "vague crusade" for moral order and the power of the military and the state.⁷ The French Revolution lent its language to the Dreyfus Affair, and the legacy of the French Revolution became

³ François Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, trans. Elborg Forster (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 2.

⁴ Tony Judt, *Past Imperfect: French Intellectuals, 1944-1956* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 254.

⁵ Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, 3.

⁶ Quoted in Michael Burns, *France and the Dreyfus Affair: A Documentary History* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1999), 111.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 111. Also, David Drake, *French Intellectuals and Politics from the Dreyfus Affair to the Occupation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 23.

one of the intellectual points of argument between the Dreyfusards and the Anti-Dreyfusards.

One of the most lasting legacies of the Dreyfus Affair was the creation of a political intellectual society. The label "intellectual" was not new, but the Dreyfus Affair created groups of intellectuals, such as the *Ligue des droits de l'homme* (The League of the Rights of Man), where before there had only been individuals and loose confederations of friends. Where once the term "intellectual" had been applied to individuals such as Voltaire or Hugo, it now became a collective term, referring to modern movement committed to preserving truth, justice, and the legacy of the Revolution.

After the Dreyfus Affair, the Revolution came to symbolize not just a rebirth, but also a defense of natural justice. The Dreyfus Affair created a French Left that was acutely aware of its roots in the French Revolution and of the modern responsibility of upholding the Revolution's values of justice, liberty, and truth.

The myth of the French Revolution was not limited to France, and the language of the French Revolution was especially persistent. The Jacobins, Thermidor, the sans-culottes, and the Great Terror – all resurfaced in the language of other revolutions, most notably the Russian Revolution. The Bolsheviks in Russia were acutely aware of their movement's roots in 1789 and the Paris Commune of 1871.⁸ The Russian Revolution was described in 1917 as the natural daughter of the

⁸ In *State and Revolution*, for example, Lenin devotes a chapter to a discussion of the Paris Commune and Marx's perception of it, which is important to him as the "first attempt by a proletarian revolution to smash the bourgeois state machine." The Russian Revolutions of 1905 and 1917 were continuing "the work of the Commune and [confirming] Marx's brilliant

French Revolution; indeed, it could not have been the product of anything else.⁹ The nineteenth-century battle between socialism and liberalism over the legacy of the French Revolution was partly resolved by the Russian Revolution. In October 1917, the French Revolution became "more than just the matrix of probabilities that could and would engender another permanently liberating revolution, more than just the realm of possible developments that Jaurès had discovered and described in all its richness. It had become the mother of an actual event."¹⁰

It was impossible for the French to avoid seeing the Russian Revolution through the lens of 1789. The language the 19th century French socialists used when they wrote about the French Revolution is strikingly similar to the language the 20th century French communists used to write about the Russian Revolution. The late 19th century socialists developed the idea of the French Revolution as a beginning, a "preconfiguration," a rebirth. Jean Jaurès saw the French Revolution as a perpetual gift: "The least of its greatness is the present. ... Its prolongations are unlimited."¹¹ Serge echoes Jaurès's vision when he calls the Russian Revolution "the beginning of everything, the prodigious first day of Creation."

When the Great War ended a year later, communists in France looked towards the Bolsheviks in earnest. There was no official French Communist Party at the time; those who sympathized with the Bolsheviks had not yet formed a united group.

historical analysis." Lenin himself saw the roots of the Russian Revolution in France. From Robert C. Tucker, *The Lenin Anthology* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1975), 311-398.

⁹ Furet, *Interpreting the French Revolution*, 85. Furet references a 1920 pamphlet by Albert Mathiez, a historian of the French Revolution, titled *Le Bolchévisme et le Jacobinisme*. It was a common comparison at the time.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Quoted *Ibid.*, 7.

Instead, the French communists had folded themselves into other leftist groups, which in France were plentiful and diverse. The largest collection of communist sympathizers belonged to the Socialist Party, the *Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière* (SFIO), though many others, such as Victor Serge, did not.

The SFIO began at the 1905 merger of two opposing interpretations of socialism. On one side stood the French Socialist Party, the social-democratic socialist party led by Jean Jaurès, and on the other side stood the Socialist Party of France, the more Marxist-inclined party led by Jules Guesde. The two conflicting parties merged at the bequest of the Second International. The Second International was the international Marxist-socialist federation that included many prominent members of the Western and Eastern European Left before the War. Lenin belonged for a time, as did several other Bolsheviks, until the Second International was all but dissolved. The Second International attempted to pursue an anti-militarist doctrine, but it collapsed under the pressure of war.

The SFIO never fully overcame the divisions that existed when it formed; though the fault lines shifted as the Party faced new troubles and challenges, it was never a truly unified party. It encountered a very serious challenge to unity when the Bolsheviks succeeded in seizing Moscow in October 1917.

The Second International was revived after the War, but by then the Bolsheviks in Moscow had already established a new, Third International, entirely

communist, that made a great effort to completely delegitimize the "yellow" Second International.¹²

Despite Serge's prophetic vision of Russia as the birthplace of a new, communist, world, all was not so clear in the new Holy Land itself. The formation of the Communist International, abbreviated as the Comintern, was a strategic defense against threatening international powers. The future of Bolshevism was not perfectly clear; though the Bolsheviks had secured control of the government in Moscow and Leningrad (formerly St. Petersburg), and were engaging the Menshevik White Army in battles across the new Soviet Union, their standing abroad was perilous. The Brest-Litovsk treaty that concluded the Soviet war with Germany earned the Bolsheviks few international supporters, as the rest of Europe was still swept up in the bloodshed of World War One. In addition, America, Great Britain, Canada, Italy, and Japan all sent troops into Russia to support the White Army; the Bolsheviks were besieged by outside powers not just in the ideological sense, but in a very physical sense as well. Even internally, despite military and political gains, the Bolsheviks had yet to hold sway over the people.¹³

The greatest show of support came from Western Leftist intellectuals like Serge, who abandoned everything to travel to Russia across war-torn country. Serge

¹² The Second International was also called the Berne International during and after the war because it took refuge in Switzerland at the beginning of the war. At the First Congress of the Communist International (the Third International), Lenin declared that "Nothing that the yellow Berne International does can conceal from the people the now thoroughly exposed exploiting character of bourgeois freedom, bourgeois equality and bourgeois democracy." Lenin, "First Congress of the Communist International," Marxist Internet Archive, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1919/mar/comintern.htm>. Accessed 22 March 2010.

¹³ For a more detailed discussion of this period of Soviet history, consult Adam B. Ulam's *The Bolsheviks* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

describes crossing the Soviet border with other pilgrims in the middle of the night: "Choked with joy, we shouted 'Greetings, comrade!' to a Red sentry; he nodded, and then asked if we had any food." Instead of the surging crowds and thrilling revolutionary spirit they imagined, Serge and his fellow pilgrims encountered fierce poverty, starvation, and a general apathy toward the revolution. As he and his fellow travelers pass a second outpost, they managed to pick up a little Party publication out of Petrograd and in reading it receive their "first shock":

All we knew of the French Revolution, of the Paris Commune, of 1905 in Russia, showed us popular ferment, bubbling ideas, rivalry of clubs, parties, and publications – except during the Terror, under the 'Reign of the Supreme Being'; but the Terror of 1793 was simultaneously a climax and the beginning of a decline, the approach to Thermidor. In Petrograd we expected to breathe the air of a liberty that would doubtless be harsh and even cruel to its enemies, but was still generous and bracing. And in this paper we found a colourless article, signed 'G. Zinoviev', on 'The Monopoly of Power'. *'Our Party rules alone ... it will not allow anyone. ... The false democratic liberties demanded by the counter-revolution.'* I am quoting from memory, but such was certainly the sense of the piece. We tried to justify it by the state of siege and the mortal perils; however, such considerations could justify particular acts, acts of violence towards men and ideas, but not a theory based on the extinction of all freedom.¹⁴

When he arrived in Moscow, Serge found work with the Comintern as it prepared for the Second Congress of the Comintern in 1920. He translated, transcribed, and organized, working "literally day and night to prepare for it, since, thanks to my knowledge of languages and the Western world, I was practically the only person available to perform a whole host of duties."¹⁵

¹⁴ Serge, *Memoirs*, 69.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 100.

Serge was privy to the internal workings of the congress in a way that most Europeans who attended were not. He made Russia, "our poor Republic," his home. In his memoirs, he speaks with great admiration of Lenin's humbleness, and of the general honor of the Bolsheviks, in spite of their contradictions. By contrast, he saw very little to recommend the Western European communist movements; he was not even convinced there was communism outside of Russia.¹⁶

There were others from France besides Serge who attended the Second Congress. Alfred Rosmer arrived as the deputy of the Paris Committee of the Third International, a small, openly Bolshevik group. Serge greatly admired Rosmer and his colleague, Raymond Lefebvre, in whom Serge saw great dedication and potential. He thought very little of the representatives of the SFIO, Marcel Cachin and L.-O. Frossard. Serge found both Frossard and Cachin "highly Parliamentary in their approach," that is, insufficiently communist. Cachin, he wrote, "was, as usual, sniffing out the direction of the prevailing wind."¹⁷

The Second Congress of the Comintern met in July 1920, and Lenin's outline of the goals of the Congress, his "Theses on Fundamental Tasks of the Second Congress of the Communist International," reveals its international aims. Lenin devoted the last section of the "Theses" to the "Rectification Of The Political Line—Partly Also Of The Composition—Of Parties Affiliated Or Desiring To Affiliate To The Communist International," and in this section, he outlined the standards and qualifications of membership in the Third International. These general suggestions

¹⁶ Serge, *Memoirs*, 104.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

became specific rules to follow when G. Zinoviev oversaw the ratification of the twenty-one "Theses on the conditions of admission to the Communist International" during the seventh session of the Congress on July 30, 1920.¹⁸

The twenty-one conditions consisted of guidelines for publishing propaganda bearing a "really communist character" in the right areas: the army, the peasantry, the working-class, and all those favorable to the communist cause. They also outlined how to purge the Parties of centrists, reformers and "opportunists," and they asserted repeatedly that all Parties belonging to the Comintern had to defer in every way to its Executive Committee. The twenty-one conditions created a system by which budding Communist parties could prove their zeal, their devotion to the cause, by proving their obedience to the Comintern. The parties or individuals who "fundamentally" rejected the Theses would be expelled.¹⁹

Cachin and Frossard, who Serge found so distasteful, attended as emissaries from the SFIO, which had not yet decided how to place itself in relation to the Bolsheviks and the Comintern. In February 1920, the SFIO had met in Strasbourg to resolve lingering moral and political questions about the international socialist movements' participation in the recently concluded war, and to discuss the way

¹⁸ The full text of the conditions can be found most easily on the Marxist Internet Archive "Minutes of the Second Congress of the Communist International, Seventh Session, July 30, 1920," <http://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/2nd-congress/ch07.htm>. Accessed 10 February 2010. Hereafter cited as Second Comintern Congress Minutes. It is also interesting to note that according to Victor Serge in his memoirs, there were actually twenty-two conditions. The twenty-second excluded Freemasons. From Serge's *Memoirs*, 108. For a more detailed discussion of the French socialist reaction and opinion about the twenty-one conditions and about the promises and threats of Moscow in general, consult Albert S. Lindemann, *The Red Years: European Socialism vs. Bolshevism, 1919-1921* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974).

¹⁹ Second Comintern Congress Minutes.

forward with Moscow. On the Left stood the communists and the more radical socialists, led by Cachin and Frossard, who voted for unconditional membership in the new Comintern. The more conservative, parliamentary-minded Right was adamantly opposed to the Comintern and wished to remain in the Second International. In the middle stood the Reconstructionists, led by Fernand Lorient, who sought a middle ground to avoid a split in the Party. They advocated a negotiated agreement with Moscow, in alliance with other Western parties. They were reluctant to join the Comintern unconditionally, but with the proper conditions and the support of other Western parties, they would consider membership.

Though there was a significant Left contingent voting for unconditional membership in the new Comintern, it was outnumbered and out-argued by the alliance of the Right and the Reconstructionists. The right-center majority voted to leave the Second International but wait for other socialist parties to join the Comintern before joining themselves. They also voted to send a delegation, consisting of Cachin and Frossard, to Moscow to discuss the French situation with the Comintern.²⁰

At the Comintern Congress, the feelings on the French Socialists were neither overwhelmingly positive nor overwhelmingly negative. The French were mocked for their centrism, and Zinoviev made specific references to some of the French socialists, "notorious opportunists" who he found particularly offensive, by name, including Jean Longuet. The consensus among Lenin, Zinoviev, and other key

²⁰ For a more detailed discussion of the Strasbourg Congress, consult Lindemann, *The Red Years*, 96-102.

participants in the Congress was that though having a French party in the Comintern was vital to the westward expansion of communism, the French at present were insufficiently communist to deserve membership. Serge suggests in his memoirs that the Twenty-One Theses were designed with particular reference to the French situation, in the hopes that the Theses would give the communists trapped within the SFIO the right amount of motivation to either convert the skeptical sections of the SFIO, or split entirely.²¹

Zinoviev also called the position of Cachin and Frossard a "retreat," and declared that, "we will not take the ... French Socialist Party as [it is] now. We demand a purge and a transformation of the entire politics of [this party]. And we will get it."²² Cachin and Frossard defended the good communist intentions of their divided party: "You have pointed out to us," they wrote to the Executive Committee of the Comintern in June, "and justly so, that a verbal recognitions of all these principles consecrated by the Russian revolution is not enough. Words must be confirmed by action – with this we fully agree."²³

Frossard and Cachin were enthusiastic delegates to a Comintern unconvinced by the sincerity of their protestations of devotion to communism. They reported back to a party unconvinced by the Comintern's motions of inclusion. Many of the more moderate communist sympathizers, along with the whole right and center groups in the SFIO feared that membership in the Comintern would result in their immediate

²¹ Serge, *Memoirs*, 108.

²² Second Comintern Congress Minutes.

²³ Frossard and Cachin, "Declaration Submitted to the Executive Committee of the Communist International on 19 June, 1920", *Pravda*, 4 July 1920. French Subject Collection, Box 30, Hoover Institution Archives.

expulsion. The only other option for the dedicated communist supporters was a split from the party. The most radical communists, like Boris Souvarine, were ready and willing to make a split. Many of the more conciliatory and moderate communists, such as Frossard, however, were not, and the SFIO labored for months over the Twenty-One Conditions and the situation in Moscow, trying to decide what to do.

Frossard, Cachin, Souvarine, and others made an intensive push for Comintern membership throughout the summer and fall of 1920, attempting to convince both the SFIO and Communists abroad (especially in Russia) of their good intentions. Cachin and Frossard gave optimistic and romantic reports of their visits to Russia, painting a picture similar to what Serge and others had envisioned at the very beginning of the Revolution. From Petrograd, they wrote to *The Socialist*, the organ of the SFIO:

New forms of socialist life are developing before our eyes. ... They are building up day by day the Socialist life where work alone is the passport to existence. The task from now on is sufficiently advanced to serve as experience and enlightenment to the workers of the world. ... there is complete confidence in the stability, the continuance and radiance of the revolution. ... Personally, we think adhesion necessary.²⁴

By December 1920, the Bolshevik supporters had assembled a large supporting group within the SFIO. Among those who opposed the Comintern, the criticism ranged from "unequivocally hostile," in the case of Leon Blum and his socialist followers, to Longuet, who supported "affiliation with reservations," but all

²⁴ Cachin and Frossard, "Cachin and Frossard Deem Adhesion to the Third International Necessary," *The Socialist*, 14 (30), August 1920, p. 261, French Subject Collection, Box 30, Hoover Institution Archives.

those who did not unequivocally accept the Comintern found it oppressive and dangerous.²⁵

When the SFIO met for its congress in Tours on Christmas 1920, the ties holding the party together, already weakened by internal conflict, were straining. Debate followed debate, but it soon became clear that the SFIO was no longer a united party, as much as it ever had been, and that the feelings on both sides of the issue were too strong to ever expect reconciliation or compromise. Though many involved in the debate, such as Loriot and Frossard, wanted to avoid a split in the SFIO, the strain of the conflict proved too much.²⁶ The demands of the Comintern were satisfied at Tours, when supporters of the Comintern defeated the opposition in a three-to-one vote.²⁷ The opposing minority, led by Blum, kept the Socialist title, and the rebel majority assumed a new name, the *Section Française de l'Internationale Communiste* (SFIC). The SFIC immediately joined the Comintern.

After the split at Tours, the first few months in the Comintern were filled with excited expansion. The SFIC benefited from the new membership of several intellectuals with strong ties to Moscow, including Souvarine and Serge. Other prominent intellectuals also affiliated themselves with the new French Party, such as Georges Pioch, Anatole France and the feminist poet and journalist Séverine. The Party accumulated a cadre of luminaries – writers, thinkers, intellectuals of all sorts –

²⁵ Lindemann, *The Red Years*, 258. Longuet's suggestion "affiliation with reservations" was outlined in a resolution he drafted in response to Zinoviev's taunts. No one, according to Lindemann, ever expected Zinoviev and the Comintern to take Longuet's suggestions seriously, but nonetheless Frossard continued trying to convince Longuet that he would not suffer expulsion if he promised not to object to Comintern policies in the future. No one but Frossard, it seems, believed this either.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 267.

²⁷ Caute, *Communism and the French Intellectuals*, 74.

and the intellectuals brought a literary vigor to the party message. They were drawn to the Party, believing that "only the enlightened could liberate the unenlightened."²⁸

The months after the resolution of the Russian Civil War and the solidification of the Bolshevik regime were flush with excitement and a sense that anything was possible, even in spite of the increasing hints of despotism in the Bolshevik government. The early French communist intellectuals had a certain degree of freedom in the way they chose to fulfill their duty to the party, and they approached the task with romantic relish. Upon her arrival in Moscow working for famine relief, Magdeleine Marx (later Paz) wrote, "You find a totally new relationship between men and things."²⁹ It was "devotion to a burning idea which enabled the French communist intellectuals to regard the Soviet Republic ... as sustaining its first promise" of world liberation from the confines of capitalism and bourgeois cruelty.³⁰ The French communist intellectuals published literary works alongside political journalism; *l'Humanité*, the official journal of the SFIC, had an entire section devoted to *La Vie Intellectuelle*. In those first few flushed years after the revolution, Party Communism was easily compatible with intellectual production.

Not all intellectuals immediately joined the Party. French communism has a long history of "fellow-travelers," those who consider themselves communists and support the general outlines of the Party ideology, but who chose, for whatever reason, not to join. The "fellow-traveler" practice began soon after the formation of

²⁸ Cauter, *Communism and the French Intellectuals*, 77.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 78. Marx later divorced her husband and remarried to Maurice Paz. Later in the thesis, she is referred to as Magdeleine Paz.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 78.

the SFIC, when intellectuals such as Henri Barbusse found the Party appealing, but decided they could be more useful to the communist cause outside the Party organization.³¹ By 1923, however, a majority of the communist intellectuals had joined the Party and begun a practice of intellectual communist engagement.

The French Party was relatively stable in its first months of infancy. The communists had shown that their political positions were irrevocably opposed to those of the socialists, and both sides enjoyed the relative calm after the split. The first serious sign of trouble in the SFIC began a few months later when Lenin introduced the idea of a United Front against the "the international bourgeoisie," who Lenin believed threatened to "resume the war" against the proletariat.³² Lenin introduced the idea of an international alliance of Leftist groups at the Third Congress of the Comintern in 1921, but he did not outline the specific goals of his United Front until the Fourth Congress in 1922. The goal of the United Front was to organize the radical, proletarian left against the machinations of the bourgeoisie, who, Lenin argued, were acutely feeling the "continual decline of capitalism."³³ This would involve creating a union among the various leftists parties with similarities to or sympathies with communism – the anarchists, some of the socialists, and others.

³¹ Cauter, *Communism and the French Intellectuals*, 75.

³² V. Lenin, "Theses for a Report on the Tactics of the RCP" (presented at the Third Congress of the Communist International, June-July 1921), in the Marxist Internet Archive, <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1921/jun/12.htm#s3> Accessed 14 February 2010. Hereafter, cited as the Third Comintern Congress Theses.

³³ V. Lenin, "Theses on Comintern Tactics" (presented at the Fourth Congress of the Communist International, 5 December 1922) in the Marxist Internet Archive, <http://www.marxists.org/history/international/comintern/4th-congress/tactics.htm> Accessed 14 February 2010. Hereafter cited as the Fourth Comintern Congress Theses.

The ostensible goal was to consolidate worker support of the Communist Party in Europe. Since most of the workers in Western Europe were not yet affiliated with communist parties, the most sensible tactic, it seemed to Lenin, would be to attract their support by supporting an alliance between the Comintern's communist cells and groups that were more popular among the working class, such as the socialists. In his speech to the Third Congress, he reminded his audience that in Europe, "where almost all the proletarians are organized, we must win the majority of the working class and anyone who fails to understand this is lost to the communist movement."³⁴

Inside Russia, the United Front was sensible and strategic; the weakness of the Soviets in the international arena made the idea of an international support group appealing to a beleaguered Bolshevik Party. In a report on the state and tactics of the Russian Communist Party at the Third Congress of the Comintern in June 1921, Lenin wrote:

Dictatorship is a state of intense war. That is just the state we are in. There is no military invasion at present; but we are isolated. On the other hand, however, we are not entirely isolated, since the whole international bourgeoisie is incapable of waging open war against us just now, because the whole working class, even though the majority is not yet communist, is sufficiently class-conscious to prevent intervention.³⁵

³⁴ Third Comintern Congress Theses.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

Lenin was aware, however, that many Western Communist Parties would not find his suggestion palatable. He himself acknowledged that he was "taking up a defensive position."³⁶

French communists were among the most vocal of the United Front's opponents; Bukharin reported that 69 per cent of the French Party opposed the idea in 1922.³⁷ The French Party was in no danger; the SFIC still had far more members than the SFIO a year after the split. The idea of collaborating with their recent enemies, with whom they had broken on the grounds of "revolutionary purity and intransigence," was intellectually repellent. This aversion was especially acute since the USSR was largely responsible for the split between the SFIO and the SFIC in the first place. Without the repeated insistence on a French "purge" from the Comintern in the early months of 1920, the fault lines between the communists and the socialists would not have opened so deeply or so widely. The same Comintern, who two years earlier had doubted the French communist resolve, now informed the SFIC that the best course of action was to ally themselves again with the "notorious opportunists" of the SFIO. The French expressed disappointment and surprise that Moscow wanted to implement such a policy with no regard to the individual domestic affairs of each country involved.³⁸

There were, however, members of the Party who felt that obedience to Moscow was more important than any squeamish feelings about intellectual purity. While the "Centrists," such as Frossard and Cachin, wanted to defy Moscow to

³⁶ Third Comintern Congress Theses.

³⁷ Cauter, *Communism and the French Intellectuals*, 86.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

preserve the intellectual integrity of the Party, those on the Left, led by Boris Souvarine, stressed that support of the International was more important than support of some lofty intellectual ideals. The basis of the Left's argument lay in the idea that the Party controlled the intellectual state of communism; intellectual purity could only come from obedience to the party. On this view, the Party and Communism were inseparable, and it was impossible to abandon one without abandoning the other. However, the Centrists had the majority, and for the first and the last time, the SFIC said no to the Comintern.

David Caute, in *Communism and the French Intellectuals*, describes this conflict as the French Communists "getting their first taste in practice of the absolute discipline laid down in the twenty-one conditions which they had so enthusiastically endorsed twelve months before."³⁹ It is important to note, however, that most of the "absolute discipline" came not from Moscow, but from fellow Party members. Boris Souvarine and other intellectuals on the Left, in support of Moscow, were ruthless in their condemnation of those who opposed the Party line.

The SFIC's defiance did not last long. Souvarine and the other supporters of Moscow campaigned mercilessly against the Centrists. Souvarine, who edited the *Bulletin Communiste*, an official journal of the Party, published Lenin's writings about the United Front, dismissed concerns about the increasing despotism of the Moscow Party with biting sarcasm, and in general continued his unrelenting attack on

³⁹ Caute, *Communism and the French Intellectuals*, 86.

the Centrists in the pages of his journal until the Fourth Congress of the Communist International in December of 1922.⁴⁰

At the Fourth Congress, Lenin restated his expectations for the United Front, and reminded his Russian and European comrades in attendance that defiance of the United Front, or strong expressions of concern or disagreement, would result in expulsion. The Fourth Congress, he wrote, "categorically demands that all sections and all members keep strictly to this tactic, which will bring results only if it is unanimously and systematically carried out not only in word but also in deed."⁴¹

Lenin's reinforcement of the demands of the Comintern, along with the unrelenting attacks on the Centrists by Leftists like Boris Souvarine created an atmosphere in the SFIC that was extremely hostile to all but the most disciplined members of the Party. Frossard, then the Secretary-General of the Party, quit, likening the demands of the Comintern to unbearable "Jesuit-like discipline."⁴² A small group of Centrist intellectuals, including Georges Pioch and Noël Gardiner formed a committee of intellectuals within the Party to voice criticisms of Moscow's dogmatism. They were all expelled immediately.

Souvarine, returning from Moscow in early 1923, lauded the newly purified Party. "The Party," he wrote in April 1923, "traces its line without letting itself be influenced by disabled, hesitant or erring elements. Its strength has always been to

⁴⁰ Cauter, *Communism and the French Intellectuals*, 87. As an example of Souvarine's dogmatic support of Moscow, consider his response to concerns about a trial of Socialist Revolutionaries in Moscow: "The Revolution wishes to live, and that is all there is to say."

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

rectify its tactics according to the needs of the moment ... this strength has remained intact."⁴³

Those who left the Party, either by expulsion or by choice, faced a decision about their political and intellectual futures: whether to abandon communism completely, or to pursue a way to be communist outside the Communist Party.

Many of the expelled intellectuals continued to pursue political engagement. L.-O. Frossard, for example, formed a Socialist-Communist Union Party, which attracted many of the first dissidents. Georges Pioch became its first Secretary General.

It is tempting, perhaps, to see this moment as the beginning moment of the French Communist Opposition, but this view would be too hasty. For one, most of the expelled intellectuals did not remain communist; many were simply "temperamentally unsuited."⁴⁴ The 1923 exodus was the first major split in the nascent SFIC and it dramatically affected the way the remaining members thought about the unity of the Party.

The Bolsheviks spoke in extremes, in the "all-or-nothing" language common to Revolutions. The French Revolution used the same vocabulary. Within this language, opposition is easily aligned with betrayal, and opposing a particular point, such as the United Front, is tantamount to opposing the entire system. After the 1923 split, the French Party was suddenly in an intellectually smaller space. There was

⁴³ Quoted in Caute, *Communism and the French Intellectuals*, 88.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* Caute writes of Georges Pioch: "He was one of many French intellectuals who have joined and left a Communist Party to which they were temperamentally unsuited."

little room for dissent, and indeed no one who remained felt the need. The SFIC appeared to have achieved stability, within itself and with relation to Moscow.

In Moscow, however, trouble brewed. Lenin suffered several violent strokes through the course of 1923, and he began to set up the Bolshevik Party to continue without his leadership. The air in Moscow was tense. The candidates for Lenin's choice of successor ranged from Trotsky, who balanced intellectualism and practicality, to Stalin, a former Revolutionary guerilla, to a host of other Politburo members.⁴⁵ Lenin's choice of successor would determine the future of the Party domestically and abroad.

The SFIC, still readjusting to its reduced size, would feel the repercussions of the choice most acutely. After the Centrist Purge, it was now even more attuned to Moscow, for both support and approval. In a March 1924 bulletin to Politburo of the Russian Party, the SFIC outlined its goals and accomplishments of the last year, reaffirming its decision to purge itself:

Our party freed itself last year of strange and dangerous elements that were not part of the proletariat. Belonging to [the proletariat] is the primary condition for entrance into the Party. Only the old, proven militants who came from the ranks of the intellectuals are exceptions to the rule. For all the non-proletarian intellectuals, the doors of the French Communist Party are closed.

The principle task that was posed to the Communist Party congress last year was to improve the quality of the party in spite of the number of members, and in spite of all the difficulties, this task was brilliantly achieved. We are only 60,000, and that is all. But all those 60,000 represent an intimate proletarian family, united and cemented in a unique

⁴⁵ V.I. Lenin, "Letter to the Congress", *The Lenin Anthology*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1975), 725.

organism by the internal discipline and by the confidence felt towards the leaders.⁴⁶

Despite this show of confidence, in reality, the Party was on much less stable ground by March 1924. The unity it had attempted to achieve with the 1923 purge of the Centrists was once again beginning to unravel, and this time the results would have far-reaching effects.

⁴⁶ Letter to the Politburo of the Central Committee of the CPSU, 18 March 1924. Russian Posol'stvo (France) Collection, Box 15, Folder 7, Hoover Institution Archives. Original French: "Notre parti s'est affranchi l'an dernier des elements étrangers et dangereux n'appartenant pas au prolétariat. Appartenir à celui-ci est la première condition pour être admis au sein du Parti. Seuls les anciens militants éprouvés issues des rangs d'intellectuels, font exception à cette règle. Pour tous les intellectuels non prolétaires les portes du parti communiste français sont fermées. La tache principale que s'était posée le congrès du parti communiste l'an dernier consistait à rehausser la qualité du parti au détriment du nombre de ses membres, et malgré toutes les difficultés, cette tâche fut brillamment accomplie. Nous ne sommes que 60.000 et voilà tout. Mais tous ces 60.000 représentent une famille prolétarienne intimement unie et cimentée en un organisme unique par la discipline intérieure et par la confiance envers les chefs."

Night falls, the boat puts in
stop singing.
Exile relights its captive lanterns
on the shore of time.
O solitudes, here we are
standing and free and willing,
faithful to what men are making of these times.

—Excerpted from "Boat on the Ural River,"
by Victor Serge

CHAPTER 2

Breaking Away and Rebuilding

When Boris Souvarine returned to Paris from the 1923 Moscow Congress of the Comintern, he spoke proudly of the SFIC's decision to purge itself of its Centrist, "arriviste," disease. He declared, "*la sélection par-dessus tout*" – selection above all else.¹ The force of his statement, its totality, encompasses the feelings that the remaining orthodox members of the Party shared. The Party, they felt, must be pure, it must be precise, and it must function as an ever-obedient arm of the Soviet government.

Those who survived the 1923 purge of the Centrists were the more political of the original members of the SFIC. Many of the "purist" intellectuals had been expelled, because they opposed what they perceived as the arbitrary and unnecessarily total imposition of Soviet rule during the conflict over the United Front policy. They were the members most committed to the intellectual purity of communism. To suggest an alliance with a group like the socialists was repulsive on a number of levels.

Still, several intellectuals remained in the Party. Those who stayed found ideological purity in the word of the Party, regardless of its deviation from overarching intellectual assertions. Boris Souvarine was such an intellectual.

Souvarine deserves the label "intellectual," not because he was particularly fond of the intellectual pursuits of some of the late members, like the poetry of

¹ David Caute, *Communism and the French Intellectuals: 1914-1960* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1964), 88.

George Pioch or Noël Garnier, but because he assumed a role in the Party as a dispenser and organizer of intellectual knowledge. His position as the editor of the party organ *Bulletin Communiste* gave him control over what the Communist Party at large read. He was also a prolific writer in his own right.

The *Bulletin* began publishing before the split at Tours, calling itself the "Organe du Comité de la 3e Internationale" (the Organ of the Committee of the Third International). Souvarine was its editor-in-chief from its beginnings, in early 1920, until April 1924. In the months before the Congress of Tours, its pages swelled with writings from Moscow and appeals from France, pushing doggedly for membership in the Comintern. In 1921, after the split at Tours, it declared itself the official "Organe du Parti Communiste" (the Organ of the Communist Party). The *Bulletin* was published every Thursday in Monmartre, Paris, and it was one of the larger communist journals. Organized like a pamphlet, it often ran over twenty pages, featuring French articles as well as articles by prominent Bolsheviks. On important Communist anniversaries, the whole cover was taken up by a picture of Lenin, or other famous Bolshevik leaders. The contents of the journal provide us a way to get at the intricate balance of power during the years 1923 and 1924, when the French Party struggled with intense internal divides. Even the journal itself became a battleground, bringing what began as a political debate into intellectual territory.

In January 1924, from the 20th to the 23rd, the SFIC met for a Party Congress in Lyons, and Lenin died on January 21. Lenin's death was a surprise, but he had been ill for over a year, since his first stroke in late 1922, and had all but ceased to participate in daily Party operations. Despite his increasing illness, he remained a

figurehead of the Party, and his mere presence tempered some of the debates that were to expand into battles after his death. The most prominent debate was the constant duel between Stalin and Trotsky.

Trotsky and Stalin had been opposed to each other for several years before Lenin's death. Their disputes ranged over a host of Party issues, from the economic future of the Soviet Union to the increasingly dictatorial turn of the Bolshevik Party. Trotsky felt that the Party ought to relinquish power to the "dictatorship of the proletariat" as soon as possible; Stalin supported the increasing bureaucratization of the Party's structure and policies. Their debates were frequent and far from cordial, but the debates maintained a modicum of civility while Lenin stayed alive.

Souvarine often covered the debates in the *Bulletin*, to promote an "active exchange of views."² When Stalin began taking a more aggressive stance against Trotsky, Souvarine's writings began to skew slightly. In January 1924, before the Congress of Lyons, he wrote of Stalin:

We are all familiar with Stalin and know what his merits are and of his role in the history of the party. We know too that Stalin represents frankness almost to the point of brutality and we therefore say to him straightforwardly: Anyone who thinks he can separate the names of Lenin and Trotsky in the eyes of the world proletariat is deceiving himself.³

Souvarine was commended in France for his portrayal of the conflict; the local cell of the SFIC, called a Federation, in Pas-de Calais, made a subscription to the

² John Paul Gerber, "Militants Against the Apparatus: The Communist Opposition in France, 1923-1932" (MA thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1973), 10.

³ Quoted *Ibid.*, 11.

Bulletin mandatory for all its members.⁴ However, his increasingly biting criticisms of Stalin began to draw attention.

The conflict continued to escalate. In Russia, Lenin was acutely aware of the danger of the rift between Stalin and Trotsky and recognized that it could lead to a split in the Party. In a "Letter to the Congress," which he hoped to read at the 1923 Party Congress, he expressed his support for Trotsky over Stalin but noted that, "relations between them make up the greater part of the danger of the split. ... if our Party does not take steps to avert this."⁵ Lenin's health deteriorated so quickly, however, that he never had the opportunity to read the letter aloud. His letter, which had now become a sort of testament, was instead read in secret by the new ruling Triumvirate of Stalin, Zinoviev, and Kamenev at the Thirteenth Party Conference of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in January 1924. They did not follow Lenin's advice, and allowed Stalin to remain in power.

At the conference, the Triumvirate accused Trotsky of "a petty-bourgeois deviation from Leninism."⁶ Though the Central Committee of the French Party, prompted by Souvarine's coverage of the debate, had defended Trotsky in the face of Stalinist defamation in late 1923, the CPSU denunciation of Trotsky made him *persona non grata* in the international Communist community. Though there had been a steady group in the Soviet Union of those, like Trotsky, who opposed the direction the CPSU was choosing to take, it was not until Trotsky was singled out at

⁴ Gerber, "Militants Against the Apparatus," 12.

⁵ V. I. Lenin, "Letter to the Congress" *The Lenin Anthology*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1975), 725.

⁶ Quoted in Cate, *Communism and the French Intellectuals*, 89.

the conference that supporting him became an act of opposition in itself. The rift between Stalin and Trotsky was now irreparable.

Amidst the shock of Lenin's death and the conflict in Moscow, the SFIC continued to hold its Party Congress in Lyons. The full implication of the new division between Trotsky and Stalin was not immediately apparent to Parties outside the Soviet Union, so when Souvarine was promoted to the Political Bureau of the SFIC, the Politburo, and he made a public defense of Trotsky during his acceptance speech, he was not punished or reprimanded.

Souvarine's first major act of opposition began later in January, though it did not come to a head until March. He began to wage a war against Albert Treint in the editorial pages of the *Bulletin*. Treint, as the joint secretary of the SFIC, was responsible for the overall direction and organization of the Party. Souvarine accused Treint of excessive softness towards reformists and socialists. He attacked Treint's use of the phrase "red imperialism," to describe a way to spread the Revolution internationally, as poorly worded and capitalistic. The major point of contention, however, came when Souvarine began directly attacking Treint's governing policies.⁷

Treint had come under criticism before. In one instance, when he had boasted that he directed the Politburo of the Party, Souvarine had cuttingly replied that, "It is for the Political Bureau to direct Treint and for the Central Committee to direct the Political Bureau."⁸ Other prominent French Communists also found Treint's governance over-centralized and authoritarian. Jules Humbert-Droz, the Comintern

⁷ Gerber, "Militants Against the Apparatus," 12-16.

⁸ Quoted *Ibid.* 13.

representative to France, called Treint's leadership overly militaristic and demanded his replacement.⁹ During the Congress of Lyons, a majority of the delegates condemned Treint's "sectarian" leadership.¹⁰ Treint began to lose favor within the Party and responded by writing frequent defenses, which Souvarine refused to publish in the *Bulletin*, escalating the conflict further.¹¹

Meanwhile, in Russia, the battle between Trotsky and Stalin intensified. Trotsky published his *New Course* in February 1924, which set out, according to Victor Serge's account of the events, "to do no more than justify a decision the Central Committee had taken in December 1923," to begin dismantling the dictatorship of the Party which had been necessary during the first few tumultuous years of the Soviet Union. Now in a period of stability, the Party needed to open up, and "the new generation, which had grown up during the Civil War, ought to be given a greater say, and the power of committees and their secretaries diminished."¹²

The *New Course* provoked a fresh wave of outrage against Trotsky. According to Serge's account, the reaction to this "very simple pamphlet" bordered on hysteric rage from the mass of the Party. The crowd accused Trotsky of attempting to dismantle the very foundations of Bolshevism. The attacks grew so hateful that the

⁹ B. Bayerlein, introduction to *Jules Humbert-Droz Archives, Vol. I: Origines et débuts des partis communistes des pays latins (1919-1923)*, ed. B. Bayerlein,, E. Kretschmann, and R. Tosstorff (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1970), viii.

¹⁰ Gerber, "Militants Against the Apparatus," 13.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹² Victor Serge and Natalya Sedova Trotsky, *The Life and Death of Leon Trotsky*, trans. Arnold J. Pomerans (New York: Basic Books Inc, 1975), 125. Hereafter cited as Serge and Trotsky.

Triumvirate was forced, for fear of a violent public confrontation, to denounce the rumor that Trotsky was to be removed from office as "malicious slander."¹³

In February, the conflict in Russia began to spill over into France. On February 8, Souvarine wrote an extensive piece on the state of the economic troubles in the Soviet Union titled "The 'New Course' of the Bolshevik Party: The Discussion as Seen From France." The piece was an examination of Trotsky's plan for the improvement of the Soviet economy, but it was framed as a neutral discussion of the economic situation in the Soviet Union. Souvarine concluded his discussion on the side of Trotsky, but he offered the article to his readers as an example of the unbiased nature of the *Bulletin*. He wrote, "Our attitude is therefore very simple: we defend the majority against the minority when the latter is mistaken or unreasonable, and we defend the minority against the majority when the latter is unjust. We are not for one tendency against the other, but for the whole party, such as it is."¹⁴

Souvarine had come under attack after his campaign against Treint for favoring the Opposition too heavily when he was supposed to remain neutral. The "New Course" article was in part an effort to counteract those accusations. He continued, however, to receive complaints that his reporting was not neutral enough. In response, he published a mocking defense titled "Our Crimes" on March 7.

His defense against accusations that he preferred to publish "Minority" (that is, Opposition) Soviet political writings instead "Majority" works, is a study in his

¹³ Serge and Trotsky, *The Life and Death of Leon Trotsky*, 127.

¹⁴ Boris Souvarine, "The 'New Course' in the Bolshevik Party: The Discussion as Seen From France," *Bulletin Communiste*, Year Six, No. 6 (8 February 1924). From the Marxist Internet Archive, <http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/writers/souvar/works/1924/02/new.htm>, Accessed 29 January 2010.

dry, deliberate, and cutting style of attack. The first important aspect of his article is that in this, as in most of his other defensive writings about the *Bulletin*, he uses the plural. Not *my* crimes, he writes, but *our* crimes. His defense is a detailed list of Russian writings that he has published, divided into "Majority Texts" and "Minority Texts," and he notes that not only has the *Bulletin* published more than four times as many majority writings as minority writings, but that most of those majority articles are also significantly longer. He is on the defensive, and after demonstrating that he has in no way favored the minority, he ends with an ominous message to his detractors: "But remember this: the *Bulletin* was not born yesterday and it will take a great deal more than this to intimidate us. ... One gets tired of doing anything, even merely discussing, with partners who are inane or dishonest."¹⁵

But the SFIC had learned from the purge of the Centrists a little over a year earlier that compromises were unnecessary. The unity of the Party came from its ideological homogeneity, not from its inclusivity; if members, even prominent ones like Souvarine, expressed views contrary to the main views of the Party, they could be removed.

The French Political Bureau soon decided to remove the *Bulletin* from the hands of its wayward editor. The Secretariat of the Party diplomatically cited "a divergence of paths" in a small notice in the middle of 21 March 1924, edition of the *Bulletin*, but despite the gentle euphemism, the writer of the notice took care to note

¹⁵ Boris Souvarine, "Nos Crimes," *Bulletin Communiste*, 7 March 1924, 278. From New York Public Library (NYPL) microform roll "Bulletin Communiste." The original French: "Mais répétons-le: le *Bulletin* n'est pas né d'hier et l'on sait qu'il en faut beaucoup plus pour l'intimider. ... On se lasse de tout, même de discuter, avec des partenaires sots ou malhonnêtes."

that the divergence was caused unequivocally by Souvarine's Oppositionist criticism against Treint. "Communist critique is one thing," the author wrote, "but personal and unfriendly polemic is another." The notice ends with a reminder: "The Director of the Party is sure to respond to the unanimous wish of our Party to see to it that the public writings of the thoughts of the Party's most responsible militants maintain a minimum level of temperance and serenity."¹⁶

Souvarine responded to his removal from the *Bulletin* in the same cutting style he used to discuss anything he did not like, and his responses to this humiliation reveal aspects of his character that reappeared later in his career with the Opposition. His response to his loss of the *Bulletin* arrived in print two weeks after the announcement of his removal. In his "Letter to the Subscribers of the *Bulletin Communiste*," Souvarine, once again speaking in the plural "we," wrote with sadness and defiance, lamenting the downfall of his publication while at the same time protesting that he had done nothing wrong:

We have the pride of not having anything to regret in what we have written and done in the *Bulletin* throughout the difficulties of the task and the documentation of the fight. ... Our work, our opinions, our theses are submitted to the judgment of all. We expose ourselves without fear, with certainty that the Communist Party and the revolutionary proletariat will recall, sooner or later, that we served them with dignity.¹⁷

¹⁶ Secretariat of the French Party, "Le changement de la Direction du «Bulletin»,» *Bulletin Communiste*, 21 March 1924, 309. NYPL microform. The original French reads: "Une chose et la critique communiste ; autre chose est la polémique personnelle et inamicale."

¹⁷ Boris Souvarine, "Lettre aux abonnés du «Bulletin Communiste»,» *Bulletin Communiste*, 4 April 1924, 253. NYPL microform. The original French: "Nous avons la fierté de n'avoir rien à regretter de ce que nous avons écrit et fait dans le *Bulletin* à travers les difficultés de la tâche et les épreuves de la lutte. ... Notre travail, nos opinions, nos thèses sont soumis au jugement de tous. Nous nous y exposons sans crainte, avec la certitude que le Parti communiste et le proletariat révolutionnaire sauront reconnaître tôt our tard, ceux qui les ont servis dignement."

According to David Caute's *Communism and the French Intellectuals*, Souvarine also destroyed or concealed "valuable documents" related to the *Bulletin* in his possession.¹⁸

Removed from his post at the *Bulletin Communiste*, Souvarine continued his turn towards the Opposition. In April, Souvarine, with the aid of Alfred Rosmer, Pierre Monatte, and others, published a French translation of Trotsky's *New Course*.¹⁹ In his foreword to Trotsky's text, Souvarine wrote that the Russian Party had become a "hierarchy of secretaries," and noted that after Lenin's death a "Lenin cult" had emerged, which reminded Souvarine too closely of a religion.²⁰ With the publication of *New Course*, Souvarine placed himself staunchly on the side of Trotsky, which meant staunchly against the official line of the Party.

When Souvarine appeared at the Fifth Congress of the Comintern in July 1924, it was before a commission of inquiry that included Zinoviev and other Party leaders, including members of the French Politburo. His defense rested on the "revised doctrine" that "the question is not to speak of indiscipline, but to examine the political basis of the indiscipline."²¹ He warned the commission that its inquiry "was less about my acts of indiscipline than about obtaining one hundred percent unanimity" within the Comintern. He continued, "I do not want to destroy this

¹⁸ Caute, *Communism and the French Intellectuals*, 90.

¹⁹ Gerber, "Militants Against the Apparatus," 25.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Quoted in Caute, *Communism and the French Intellectuals*, 90

harmony. It is very difficult in this atmosphere to express one's opinions without being immediately suspected."²²

Souvarine suffered several more days of discussion and debate alone; Trotsky was conspicuously silent. At the end of the inquiry, the commission ruled against Souvarine and he was expelled from the Party before the end of the Congress.

The fall of Souvarine sparked an exodus of other party members who likewise opposed the dogmatic turn of the party. Alfred Rosmer and Pierre Monatte, along with several others who had helped fund Souvarine's translation of *The New Course*, had already abruptly resigned from their positions at *l'Humanité*, the main Party publication. While still in the Party, they denied aiding Souvarine with *New Course*, but they declared, "If it is a crime to have published *The New Course* in France then we are as guilty as Souvarine."²³

Many quit before they suffered expulsion. Those who voluntarily left over the course of 1924 and 1925 included F. Loriot, Amedée Dunois, Marcel Martinet, and Maurice and Magdeleine Paz.

Rosmer, Monatte, and their collaborator Delagarde, remained in the Party until December 1924. They fought against the increasingly bureaucratic and "Bolshevizing" (conformist) tendencies within the Party from within, though they met

²² Quoted in Jean-Louis Panné, *Boris Souvarine: Le premier désenchanté du communiste* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1993). In the original French: "Je ne veux pas détruire cette harmonie. Il est très difficile dans cette atmosphère d'exprimer ses opinions sans être immédiatement suspect."

²³ Quoted in Gerber, "Militants Against the Apparatus," 26.

with obstinate refusal every time they suggested a change.²⁴ They attempted to revive the discussion of Trotsky and the fledgling Russian Opposition, but all attempts were subverted by maneuvers led by Treint. By December, the conflict had intensified so much that Rosmer, Monatte and Delagarde could no longer remain in the Party. At the December meeting of the Party, the three were almost unanimously expelled. All three joined the ranks of the rapidly growing French Opposition.

The situation was no less troublesome in Russia. Trotsky remained in Russia for the next three years, leading the Left Opposition movement that opposed Stalin's policies but still remained within the Party. The group expanded when Zinoviev and Kamenev fell out of favor with Stalin and decided to ally themselves with Trotsky instead.

Stalin struggled against the growing forces of the Opposition for several years, but at the Fifteenth Party Congress of 1927, he effectively dealt the Opposition its final blow. The Congress, led by Stalin, condemned Trotskyism explicitly and ordered all Trotskyists to recant in public. Kamenev and Zinoviev capitulated, but Trotsky and his strongest supporters (Radek, Rakovsky, and others) "stood firm and declared that they would remain faithful to the Party and fight for its reform outside its ranks."²⁵

Over the course of the year, the Russian Opposition slowly disintegrated. While some, like Serge, remained loyal, most either succumbed to the pressure to recant, or simply disappeared at the hands of the Party. Serge, in his memoirs, wrote that, "In

²⁴ Robert Wohl, *French Communism in the Making, 1914-1924* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1966), 414.

²⁵ Serge and Trotsky, *The Life and Death of Leon Trotsky*, 153-54.

their different ways, all the Oppositionists of 1927, whether they chose endless humiliation through loyalty to the Party or endless resistance through loyalty to Socialism, followed the same terrible road right to its end."²⁶

Souvarine, Rosmer, Monatte, and other expelled French comrades recognized the magnitude of persecution that was occurring in Russia, but despite the signs, the official Party remained willfully ignorant. The Party was obviously aware of the ramifications of the Russian conflict, since the 1924 expulsions were based largely on protests over the conflict, but many of the leading members of the Party still did not recognize precisely what was happening to the Russian Opposition.

Serge, who was in Leningrad writing as the Soviet correspondent to the French communist journal *Clarté*, recalled how frustrating it was to encounter Western communists who still remained unaware of, or apathetic to, the dangerous nature of the Stalin Trotsky feud. In his *Memoirs*, he recalled meeting with Henri Barbusse, a French Party leader, in a Moscow hotel in 1927. Barbusse treaded delicately between the two sides of the battle, simultaneously dedicating his next book to Trotsky, but refusing to visit Trotsky in Moscow "for fear of compromising himself."²⁷ When informed by Serge of the persecution of Trotsky and the Opposition, Barbusse "pretended to have a headache, or not to hear, or to be rising to stupendous heights: 'Tragic destinies of revolutions, immensities, profundities, yes... yes... Ah, my friend!'"²⁸

²⁶ Victor Serge, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary, 1901-1941*, trans. Peter Sedgwick (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 237.

²⁷ Serge, *Memoirs*, 237.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 238.

In December 1927, Serge was called before the Control Commission of the Leningrad Central District to defend his Oppositionist writings. When he declared that the Party was making a "grave error" in expelling all dissidents, he, too, was immediately expelled. He was arrested in the middle of the night a few days later, and after about eight weeks spent in cold Soviet prison cells, he was released. This was not the last time Serge endured the Soviet prisons. "Our crime as Oppositionists," he wrote, "lay simply in existing, in not disowning ourselves."²⁹ The Russian Opposition suffered its final blow when Trotsky was suddenly arrested, expelled from the Party, and exiled to Alma-Ata on the Turkish-Soviet border in January 1928. Without its organizational head, the Russian Opposition floundered.

Before Trotsky's expulsion, the French Opposition had already begun to form as a cohesive group. In December 1925, Magdeleine Paz was among the co-signers of a "Communist Opposition Manifesto" which warned the Party that if it continued to restrict Opposition access to the Party Press, "they would have to resort to their own means."³⁰ Souvarine also began publishing the *Bulletin Communiste* in 1925, now as an organ of the Opposition. The Pazes, along with several other Oppositionists, founded *Contre le Courant* (Against the Current), which received clandestine funding from what remained of the Russian Opposition through its Soviet leader Piatakov. Pierre Naville, who was expelled in 1928, renewed the old Communist intellectual journal, *Clarté*, for which Serge had written, under the new name of *La Lutte des Classes: Revue théoretique mensuelle de l'Opposition Communiste* (The Class

²⁹ Serge, *Memoirs*, 275.

³⁰ Caute, *Communism and the French Intellectuals*, 91.

Struggle: Monthly Theoretical Review of the Communist Opposition).³¹ The most prominent journal quickly became *La Révolution Proletarienne*, founded in January 1925 by Monatte, Rosmer, and several others. It acted as an intellectual center for the dispersed Opposition. According to Robert Wohl, "its position, as Rosmer defined it in February, was not Trotskyist, 'since there is no Trotskyism' but 'Communist syndicalist.'"³² In February, the Opposition addressed a series of letters and theses, collectively titled "Letters of the 80," to the Executive of the Communist Party, calling for a return to the "tactical and organizational principles of the Third and Fourth Congresses."³³ The Party, instead of accepting these theses, declared Souvarine, Rosmer, and Monatte enemies of the International. By December 1925, 250 communists were overtly opposed to the official Party.³⁴

While the Opposition was growing and solidifying, the French Communist Party was undergoing "Bolshevization," falling increasingly under the Soviet Party's control. At the Congress of Lille in 1926, the Party made a complete break from its muddy past by adopting an entirely new name.³⁵ The original name, the clumsy *Section Française de l'Internationale Communiste* (SFIC), was derived from the name of the Party's socialist progenitor, the *Section Française de l'Internationale Ouvrière* (SFIO). At Lille, the Party adopted a new name, the *Parti Communiste Français* (PCF). Historians have generally overlooked this name change, preferring

³¹ Robert J. Alexander, *International Trotskyism: 1929-1985: A Documented Analysis of the Movement* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 341.

³² Wohl, *French Communism in the Making*, 423.

³³ *Ibid.*, 424.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 423.

³⁵ "Statuts du Parti Communiste Français," adopted at the Congress of Lille, 1926. Hoover Institution Library.

instead to use the ambiguous title "the Party" throughout this period, to avoid confusion, but this obscures an important event. The change in name actually elucidates the changes in the Party brought on by the crisis of the Opposition. The name was adopted at the Congress without any explanation, and since historians have never discussed it, it is impossible to say why precisely the Party decided to change its name. It cannot be a coincidence, however, that the Party voted for a complete change in title in the midst of such a crisis as the one caused by the Opposition.

While the PCF bent to the wills of Moscow, the Opposition found itself facing a stubborn figure in the newly exiled Trotsky. Isaac Deutscher, one of the most prominent of Trotsky's biographers, wrote of Trotsky's arrival in Alma-Ata that he "sent out messages to friends and well-wishers in western Europe, especially in France."³⁶ The response was immediate. Alfred and Marguerite Rosmer wrote back quickly, promising that he could count on them "body and soul." Souvarine wrote to promise help and co-operation.³⁷

A few months later, he was deported further outside Russia to Prinkipo, Turkey. At Prinkipo, he received many visitors from Western Europe, who offered political and financial support. Some of the most prominent French Oppositionists came, including Alfred Rosmer and his wife and Magdeleine Paz and her husband, who lent him two thousand francs. Trotsky received them all with enthusiasm, welcoming their support, and he expressed a desire to collaborate with them to establish a large International Left Opposition. The promise of support from France's

³⁶ Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Outcast: Trotsky, 1929-1940* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 6.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

most prominent Oppositionists gave Trotsky hope for the strength of his fledgling organization. The Russian Opposition had been all but destroyed by his exile, and he turned to Western Europe as the new battleground for his fight against Stalin.

Trotsky was especially interested in Paz's journal *Contre le courant*. The Pazes began the journal after their expulsion from the Party, and Trotsky was interested in it as a potential organ for his new International Left Opposition (ILO), urging them to transform *Contre le Courant* into a "great and aggressive" weekly publication of the Opposition.³⁸ Though the Pazes promised in Prinkipo to consider restyling their journal at his request, once back in Paris, they decided against it. Protesting against his "attempt to impose Rosmer's leadership" on the journal, the Pazes broke from Trotsky irreparably.³⁹ Trotsky later wrote to Serge that "There is no need to dwell on them" and called Magdeleine Paz's efforts to have Serge released from prison in 1935 "the sole praiseworthy action of her entire life."⁴⁰

Despite this break, Magdeleine Paz remained active in the Communist Opposition. Though she and her husband stopped publishing *Contre le courant* in 1929, she continued to write in other Opposition journals. Other French Oppositionists proved equally disappointing; those "upon whom Trotsky had undoubtedly most counted proved to be an almost immediate disappointment."⁴¹

Souvarine, according to Deutscher's descriptions, began to display "intolerable airs and pretensions. He asked Trotsky to make no public statements without

³⁸ Alexander, *International Trotskyism*, 342, and Deutscher, *The Prophet Outcast*, 7.

³⁹ Quoted *Ibid.*, 342.

⁴⁰ Serge to Trotsky, 29 April 1936. In David Cotterill, *The Serge Trotsky Papers* (London: Pluto Press, 1994). Hereafter cited as *Serge-Trotsky Papers*.

⁴¹ Alexander, *International Trotskyism*, 342.

'previous agreements with the French Opposition,' that is, with himself."⁴² Souvarine's "intolerable airs and pretensions" earned him a stern rebuke from Trotsky, who wrote to tell him that, "I do not see anything left of the ties that united us a few years ago."⁴³ Trotsky later wrote to Victor Serge of the break that, "S's character does not permit him to belong to any group. At the same time he is utterly incapable of developing an independent political line of his own."⁴⁴ By 1928, Souvarine had broken with Trotsky.

Trotsky also did not develop a good relationship with Albert Treint, the former Party bureaucrat against whom Souvarine had launched his infamous polemic, now a newly minted member of the Opposition. The failure of this relationship was due mostly to the strong resentment many of Trotsky's followers felt towards Treint, he having been "principally responsible" for their expulsion from the Party.⁴⁵

Alfred Rosmer also came to Prinkipo with his wife to offer financial and political support. Rosmer and Trotsky became close friends, and Rosmer quickly became involved in the growing ILO movement. The ILO was a carefully organized group, modeled after the structure of the Communist Party, with an international secretariat, national sections, even an International Bureau much like the Party's Politburo. Rosmer was one of three members of the bureau appointed in 1930 and in

⁴² Deutscher, *The Prophet Outcast*, 46.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁴⁴ Serge to Trotsky, 29 April 1936. *Serge-Trotsky Papers*.

⁴⁵ Alexander, *International Trotskyism*, 342.

that position oversaw the various chapters of the ILO and their journals and publications.⁴⁶

Rosmer left the ILO a year later. In a bulletin to the International Secretariat, Trotsky wrote, "Following the crisis in the French Opposition one member of the bureau, comrade Rosmer, forsook the work in the Ligue, which encumbered the normal functioning of the bureau. I more than anyone else have been able to judge how injurious the voluntary ousting of Comrade Rosmer from the work of the French and the International Opposition has been."⁴⁷ When he spoke of "the crisis," Trotsky was perhaps referring to the failure of his French chapter, the *Ligue communiste*, to involve itself in various labor strikes during 1929 and 1930. This failure was also accompanied by a general disavowal of Trotsky by the French Opposition.⁴⁸

Now independent of both the PCF and the ILO, the French Communist Opposition was a loose group made up of small publications and groups, like the

⁴⁶ In 1938, the International Left Opposition oversaw the formation of a new Communist International, known as the Fourth International. The convocation ceremony was held at Rosmer's home in France, as Rosmer remained a close friend of Trotsky even after his break with the ILO in 1931. The Fourth International existed concurrently with the Third, the Comintern. Led by Trotsky and his supporters, the goal of the Fourth International was to preserve the Party structure but avoid the mistakes that had befallen the Comintern, to produce a new, purer Communist International. Though many French Trotskyists were involved in the Fourth International, the figures of the Communist Opposition in whom this thesis is interested, including Rosmer, were not.

⁴⁷ Trotsky to the International Secretariat and the National Sections of the Left Opposition, 1931. From the Leon Trotsky Collection, Box 11, Folder 26 (LT to ILO), Hoover Institution Archives. Document is in translation in collection.

⁴⁸ Despite the tension between Trotsky and the French Oppositionists, many still maintained regular correspondence with him before and after their split. In Trotsky's early years in exile, he corresponded frequently with Serge, Rosmer, Magdeleine Paz, and even, briefly, Boris Souvarine. The correspondence frequently discussed the theoretical positions as well as the state of various publications. When Trotsky asked for translation help, the French suggested possible publishing houses and promised the publication of Trotsky's writings in various Opposition journals in France.

Bulletin Communiste, or *Clarté*, or *Contre le Courant*. Their position outside the dominant political groups made theirs a precarious one. Not only were they forced to ask, as Robert Wohl has suggested, if "Communist activity [was] possible outside the Communist Party?" but also if Communist activity was possible outside of Trotsky.⁴⁹

Being outside of both organizations meant a very limited range of political motion. Opportunities for political activity, such as protests, meetings, hearings and other activities favored by the PCF and even the ILO were extremely limited for the French Opposition. Removed from the political bearings of the PCF and of Trotsky, and severely limited in its active range of motion, the French Communist Opposition turned to publications, and to writing. The decade and a half after Souvarine's initial expulsion was filled with manuscripts, pamphlets, journals, columns; all forms of political, intellectual production flourished. Souvarine himself wrote a critical biography of Stalin in 1939, the first critical, comprehensive biography of Stalin ever written.⁵⁰

Victor Serge had become a prolific writer in Russia. His first novel, *Men in Prison*, published in France in 1930, gave a fictionalized account of his time in a French prison. It is most often read as a prison narrative, like Dostoevsky's *The House of the Dead* or Solzhenitsyn's *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovitch*. In the context of his life and his later works, however, *Men in Prison* is merely the first in a large collection of fictionalized accounts of his own experiences under communism. He

⁴⁹ Wohl, *French Communism in the Making*, 426.

⁵⁰ Boris Souvarine, *Stalin: A Critical Survey of Bolshevism*, trans. C.L.R. James (New York: Alliance Book Corporation, 1939). Trotsky wrote to Serge of it: "[It] is valuable for its scrupulous selection of factual matter, but theoretically, I'm sorry to say, it is barren." Letter to Victor Serge, 29 April 1936. *The Serge-Trotsky Papers*.

published other novels over the course of the next decade, in which the most prominent theme was the desperation and frustration of life in the Soviet system.

Serge also published articles about the state of the Soviet Union in several Opposition journals, including the new *Bulletin*. He occupied an unusual position in the French movement because, for most of the early 1930s, he lived in Russia. He was far more involved with the Russian Opposition in the early years of the movement, but since Serge was a native French speaker, his reports were welcome in French publications. His experience in Russia was of interest to the French Oppositionists. The Opposition journals in France specialized in international communist news, and they regularly featured articles by Zinoviev and Trotsky, as well as reports on the state of the Spanish revolution and other political intricacies from abroad.⁵¹

Souvarine, besides editing the new *Bulletin Communiste*, also took up intellectual work of a more cultural quality. He began to work with the Marx-Engels *Institut* in Moscow as the French connection and buyer. The goal of the institute, according to its founder, D. B. Riazanov, was to "create a scientific institute, a sort of 'laboratory' where historian and activist alike could study 'in the most favourable conditions the birth, development and spread of the theory and practice of scientific

⁵¹ Members of the Opposition also kept abreast of international communist news through frequent correspondence with Opposition leaders in other countries, establishing ties with the growing American Communist movement, as well as the Workers' Party of Marxist Unification (POUM) in Spain and other French communists living abroad. This correspondence established an international community of support.

socialism', whose aim was to contribute the utmost 'to the scientific propaganda of Marxism'.⁵²

Souvarine's job for the *Institut* was to collect the best of eighteenth and nineteenth century leftist literature from various rare booksellers across France. He was also asked by the *Institut* to collect a number of cultural artifacts not directly related to socialism, such as a copy of Mozart's *Magic Flute*.⁵³ Souvarine's assignment is an undeniably intellectual one, and judging from his correspondence with Riazanov, he seemed to have enjoyed it. For a brief time he did not receive his promised pay, and Souvarine wrote a series of increasingly biting letters to Riazanov, demanding fair treatment.⁵⁴ Still, he wrote positively and fondly of the Institute and of Riazanov later in his life.

In all of the writings of the Opposition in these first years – the pamphlets, the correspondence, the literature – there are no meeting records, no hints of mobilization or agitation, no mention of protests or large-scale political activities at all. There seems to be an enormous amount of production and little to no action to correspond to it. They seem to be writing simply to be writing – production for the sake of production.

It is easy to dismiss the Opposition after the first years of its existence because it appears to be a disaffected splinter group with no political mobility and no interest in appealing to a larger audience, with members content instead to stay within

⁵² "The Marx-Engels Institute." The article, written sometime around 1931, is signed by "L.B." The Marx Internet Archive credits the article to Boris Souvarine, under a pseudonym. <http://www.marxists.org/archive/riazanov/bio/bio02.htm> Accessed 23 Feb 2010.

⁵³ Boris Souvarine Papers, Box 3, Folder 4, Hoover Institution Archives.

⁵⁴ Boris Souvarine Papers, Box 3, Folder 2, Hoover Institution Archives.

themselves, publishing their own work for sympathetic readers and not interested in creating any political change. This is precisely what most historians have done. The Opposition disappears completely from most discussions of this period after about 1926. The one historian who ventured further, John Paul Gerber, did so in a 1973 Masters Thesis at the University of Wisconsin, and even Gerber concluded that Opposition disintegrated after 1932.

But upon closer inspection, what actually emerges in the French Opposition is a culture of literature as politics. Writing becomes a political action in itself. It is not just in the publications of the Opposition, because all political groups, especially those on the Left, had several publications to their names. It is in the number of publications, in the earnest devotion to writing and intellectual production; all of this material comes out of a belief that real political change can be affected by writing the right material, and having the right people read it.

The emergence of literature as political engagement is one that occurred specifically in France. The concept of the term "intellectual" is relatively new to France, a product of the Dreyfus Affair and the awareness that it was possible to be both literary and political, and that one could influence and inform the other. As David Caute wrote, "the Dreyfus Case, and the famous Manifesto of the Intellectuals of 1898 had the effect of subjectively confirming the moral-political vocation of intellectuals in a climate of crisis which, in varying intensities, has become a permanent feature of French life."⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Caute, *Communism and the French Intellectuals*, 12.

In order to explore the roots of the French Oppositionists in the Dreyfus Affair, another literary and political group warrants further inspection. Though the French literary fascists of the 1930s and 1940s are in most regards the complete antithesis of the French Communist Opposition, they share some revealing literary history.

David Carroll, in his *French Literary Fascism*, traces the origins of the French literary fascists of the inter-war period back to the Dreyfus Affaire. This evolution is possible, he writes, because in France culture and politics are closely connected. His subjects, inter-war writers like Robert Brasillach, Pierre Drieu La Rochelle, and Thierry Maulnier, are able to be both literary intellectuals and political fascists because "their literary interests are the basis for their political dogmatism." Indeed, their "commitment to literature is in fact a commitment to politics in these instances, not just because literature and literary criticism are ideologically driven – influenced from the outside by political concerns – but rather because literature and art are considered to represent nothing less than the truth of politics."⁵⁶

Carroll's fascists are specifically literary in their practice of fascism. They favor novels, publications, and pamphlets over direct political action, but their political positions are formed from their literary careers. They often participated in fascist journals, such as *Nouvelle Revue Française* or *Je suis partout*, but that was generally the extent of their political participation. Their fascism comes from their literary pursuits.

⁵⁶ David Carroll, *French Literary Fascism: Nationalism, Anti-Semitism, and the Ideology of Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 11.

Pierre Drieu LaRochelle's writings lend a literary dimension to his conception of "the myth of an imaginary, European community at the foundation of fascism." Lucien Rebatet's "aesthetic sensibilities and literary ideals" – his love of art, music, literature, and cinema – and his virulent anti-Semitism evolved into an aesthetic totalitarian vision that strongly supported the fascist racial ideology of Nazi Germany.⁵⁷ All of the literary fascists who intrigue Carroll have political positions that come, though not always directly, from their literary and aesthetic "sensibilities."

Carroll sees this tradition emerging out of the Dreyfus Affair, during which polemic and other forms of writing became effective methods of raising awareness and affect political change. The writings of Dreyfusards and Anti-Dreyfusards alike were influential in the public opinion on the Affair as well as the official government position on Dreyfus's fate. The literary political writers of the Dreyfus Affair created movements and organizations that persisted well into the era of the French Opposition and whose membership and influence in fact grew because of the 1924 split. The *Ligue des droits des hommes* (the League of the Rights of Man) began in 1898 and persists to the present day. During the 1920s and 1930s it occasionally drew Oppositionists and other former Party members such as Séverine and, briefly Magdeleine Paz.

Carroll points to something uniquely French about the literary fascists he studies, who are known far better for their writing and their intellectual production than for their political activity. For them, and for the Communist Opposition as well, intellectual production *is* engagement because in France, culture and politics are the

⁵⁷ Carroll, *French Literary Fascism*, 13.

same beast. They feed off of, and into each other; one cannot exist without the other. It is entirely possible for the French fascists to be literary in their expressions of their political beliefs, and in the same way, the Communist Opposition in France can be seen as operating under the assumption that by writing, and producing intellectual criticism, they are engaging in the political system.

The Opposition does not have as clear a lineage to the Dreyfus Affaire as the literary fascists that Carroll studies. They have very explicit roots in the most prominent anti-Dreyfusards, but the Opposition was clearly influenced by the culture of the Dreyfus Affaire. The connection is more evident in the way the Oppositionists chose to go about their political writing, convinced that their writing could produce political change.

The first demonstration of this conviction came in 1935, when the "Victor Serge Affaire" came to a head. In 1933, Serge was once again arrested, this time in the middle of a Moscow street as he tried to buy his wife some medicine. This period of arrest, however, lasted much longer than his eight-week sentence in 1928. Serge remained in prison, and then in harsh exile until 1936.

Serge endured weeks of midnight interrogations and hours of isolation in a small cell. Knowing that other Oppositionists who had been arrested had not survived their interrogation sessions, Serge concluded that his ties to Paris were keeping him alive. In his memoirs he wrote, "I knew now that my disappearance had been made known in Paris and that, since they could not wring any signature from me which would have justified a legal condemnation, they wanted to avoid any disagreeable

fuss on my account. If I had been only a Russian militant, instead of a French author as well, matters would have taken a different turn."⁵⁸

Eventually Serge received a sentence for three years of exile in Orenburg, a small city on the banks of the Ural River, a "metropolis of the steppes, solitary under a glorious sky."⁵⁹ The GPU, the Soviet State Political Directorate that functioned as the state secret police, chose cities of various degrees of isolation for its deportees, and Orenburg was reserved for leading figures.⁶⁰ Serge maintained an income from book sales in Paris, and his wife and son moved from Leningrad to Orenburg to accompany him in exile. When the GPU returned his manuscripts and his typewriter, he began to write again. It was during his time at Orenburg that he composed his first draft of poems, which would later be published as *Resistance*. Many of the poems in this collection are an ode to the beauty of the Ural and the steppe:

Far away now, almost gone, where are they,
the four laughing girls of a moment ago?
They are on the other shore, four real girls
from my village of exile
and their image has not faded in me.⁶¹

In the early months of 1935, Serge fell gravely ill and was confined to a hospital. He feared arrest upon his release, which had become a usual practice for the GPU, but instead he was released back into Orenburg. The fact that he was not

⁵⁸ Serge, *Memoirs*, 296.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 298.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 303.

⁶¹ Victor Serge, "Four Girls," *Resistance: Poems by Victor Serge*, trans. James Brook (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1972), 10-11. The original poems were destroyed when Serge was exiled to Western Europe, and he later reconstructed them entirely from memory. The reconstructed poems were published as *Resistance*.

arrested was probably due to the rising tide of concern among leftist circles in France for his safety.

The "Victor Serge Affair" became a rallying point for many of the Oppositionists in France. Souvarine took up the cause in the *Bulletin Communiste*, as did several other oppositionist papers, like the *Révolution Proletarienne*. The United Teachers' Federation clamored for his release. The *Ligue des droits de l'homme* published a detailed documentation of the case assembled by Magdeleine Paz.

The culmination of activism around the Victor Serge Affair came at the 1935 International Congress of Writers for the Defense of Culture. The Congress of Writers was formally organized by several left-wing intellectuals, such as Henri Barbusse, Romain Rolland, André Gide, and others. In fact, as Serge wrote in his *Memoirs*, the actual initiative came from "certain Communist back rooms which specialized in organizing congresses of this kind; their objective was to arouse a pro-Stalinist movement among the French intelligentsia and buy over a number of famous consciences."⁶² A coalition of Oppositionists, including Magdeleine Paz, attended the Congress and demanded to be heard. Those who were not forcibly ejected by the stewards of the Congress caused a scene, protesting the repression of Oppositionist voices in Russia, France, Germany, Italy, and elsewhere. Finally, Paz was given the floor, and protested Serge's unjustified imprisonment "in fighting terms."⁶³

⁶² Serge, *Memoirs*, 317.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 318. There has been some sharply-worded dispute over the intricacies of the proceedings, as well as the accuracy of Serge's version of the events. Roger Shattuck, referring to Serge's *Memoirs*, wrote that the Congress was "rigged" and "steamrolled" by its Soviet sponsors, assertions that Serge's account of the trials supported. Timothy J. Reiss disagreed entirely with this account, however, and pointed out that Serge was neither present

The affair simmered for a few months, until Romain Rolland visited Stalin in April 1936. He spoke to Stalin specifically of the "Victor Serge Affair," relaying all of the uproar from Paris, including Paz's speech. Stalin ordered the head of the GPU, Yagoda, to search Serge's files, and since Serge had never signed anything that indicated his guilt or compliance, Yagoda could find no justification for Serge's imprisonment. Within three days of Rolland's conference with Stalin, Serge and his family were moved from Orenburg to Moscow and told to prepare to leave the USSR as soon as possible, to an "unknown destination" fixed by the GPU.

Serge boarded a train bound for Belgium with great pain. "My heart," he recalled, "was utterly ravaged as a I left; I was severing attachments of a unique quality."⁶⁴ As the train crossed the border into Poland, he felt himself torn away from more than a decade's worth of work and experience. "Oh, our great Russia of agonies," he wrote, "how hard it is to tear ourselves away from you!"⁶⁵

The Victor Serge Affair, and its culmination at the Writer's Congress, was a dramatic and central moment for the new French Opposition. Historians have depicted the French Opposition of this period as extinct, have tried and failed to find a successfully political structure outside the Party. In reality, however, the Victor Serge Affair and the Writer's Congress protest became the catalyst for cohesion, but of an entirely different sort than the political organization expected by scholars. It is significant that the catalytic event for cohesion was literary, because the organization

at the trial, nor was he a disinterested observer. For the purposes of this project, I have chosen to rely on Serge's account, since it is he and the other Oppositionists in which I am interested, not the Writer's Congress itself.

⁶⁴ Serge, *Memoirs*, 320.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 322.

and unity around the Serge Affair and the Writer's Conference represent the development of a literary self-consciousness in the Opposition. At this moment, after months of struggle to establish a way to self-identify outside the Party, the Opposition developed its own political identity, which proved to be literary.

Serge first arrived in Brussels, but soon secured passage to France. As the summer of 1936 began, the French Opposition welcomed Serge into its ranks. The Opposition, after months of struggle, was solidified for the moment under a new brand of literary politics, and this new cohesion came just a moment before the whole global Communist community was shaken at its roots.

Believe our confessions, join in our vow
of complete obedience; scorn our disavowals.
Once put down, the old revolt is nothing but
obedience.

May those who are less devoted be proud,
may those who have forgiven themselves be proud,
may those who are more devoted be proud,
may those who have not given up be proud.

— Excerpted from "History of
Russia III: Confessions" by Victor
Serge

CHAPTER 3
~
Trials of the Exiles
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Victor Serge, now permanently exiled from the Soviet Union, first returned to Brussels, his birthplace, but even then, he could not escape the watchful eye of the GPU. As Serge recalled, correspondence was frequently misplaced, police occasionally appeared at his apartment with search warrants, and strangers who rented the apartment a floor below "kept watch over [his] comings and goings with no pretence of concealment." The GPU remained a constant presence in his life; "The GPU has not forgotten me," he wrote at the time, "you can be sure of that."¹

Serge was also forbidden to participate in any political activities. He wrote to Trotsky on May 6, 1936, that he was only granted asylum "on the condition of my political neutrality, or (more precisely) of my non-interference in Belgian politics ... and of my 'abstention from aggressive activities which could cause international difficulties for Belgium (*sic!!!*)" In the same letter, Serge notes that despite the restrictions placed on his political activity, "as a writer I am completely free in what I say in my books, and won't allow myself to be bound hand and foot."² Serge did indeed remain a prolific writer for the rest of his life, as he moved from Belgium to France, and then, much later in his life, to Mexico. His work, both fictional and non-fictional, thus serves as an important source for understanding French Communism during the 1930s.

¹ Victor Serge, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary, 1901-1941*, trans. Peter Sedgwick (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), 327. Serge often cited his own writing from the time in his memoirs, which he wrote later.

² Serge to Trotsky, Brussels, 6 May 1936. In David Cotterill, *The Serge-Trotsky Papers* (London: Pluto Press, 1994).

Much of his work has proven invaluable as sources for this study and others. But his fiction is particularly interesting because few other Oppositionists used fiction as a literary form. Many of the Communist intellectuals who were expelled from the party during the first wave, in 1923, were intellectuals in the artistic literary tradition, such as Georges Pioch, the poet and journalist. Few of the intellectuals who lost their party membership in 1924, and who later came to make up the majority of the French Opposition, were literary in the same way. Their literature favored a political style, and it took the form of pamphlets, essays, books, and articles. Serge is an important exception because he not only felt comfortable in the political literature of his fellow Oppositionists, but he also wrote fiction and poetry.

For this reason, Victor Serge usually appears as two different people in modern history and literary criticism. For some, such as David Caute, and other historians of Communism in the 1930s, he is a political writer – prolific, but not overly literary. Others refer to him specifically in a literary context; while his revolutionary activities are acknowledged as central to his writing, there is rarely a discussion of his writing as a political act in the context of the Opposition.³ Susan Weissman's 2001 biography of Serge, *Victor Serge: The Course is Set on Hope*, provides one of the most comprehensive and contextualized discussions of his life and his works. Her analysis of his fiction places it directly in a historical context. However, her biography positions Serge as a unique phenomenon of the era,

³ In general, Serge's work is often considered part of the camp or prison genre of literature, and while his revolutionary activities are acknowledged as central to his writing, rarely is there a discussion of his writing as a political act in the context of the Opposition.

exceptional and alone, and above the fray of "internal squabbling" of the Opposition.⁴ While Weissman placed Serge in his own political and historical context, she does not include the larger context of the French Opposition. That is, she speaks of the French Opposition as distinct from Serge, in a negative way, too caught up in its "internal squabbling" to address the tasks at hand.

If we move outside of Weissman's narrative and attempt to see Serge in a French context, connections become apparent. Serge belongs to the French Opposition, both politically and literarily. When he was exiled from Russia, the separation was acutely painful, and the French Opposition was a sort of refuge. He had been involved in French Communism before he left for Russia at the start of the 1917 Revolution, and he returned to France as one of the leading members of the Russian Opposition, so it was only natural for him to take up the cause of the French Opposition as his own.

Trotsky remained Serge's most frequent correspondent from the first few days of his exile in Brussels, to the summer of 1939. In his first letter to Trotsky, Serge writes, "My thoughts too have turned to you constantly from the abyss of these black years. And I shake your hand, in all firmness and in fidelity to the strangled revolution."⁵ Trotsky, who had been living in exile since 1928, had not heard any direct news from his comrades in Russia for several months, and Serge's accounts of the terrible circumstances of the Russian Opposition horrified Trotsky.

The most shocking news came as a surprise both to Serge and Trotsky. On August 14th, 1936, the Soviet government announced a large, public trial in Moscow,

⁴ Susan Weissman, *Victor Serge: The course is set on hope* (London: Verso, 2001), 194.

⁵ Serge to Trotsky, Brussels, 22 April 1936. *Serge-Trotsky Papers*.

whose defendants included Zinoviev, Kamenev, Ivan Smirnov, and thirteen other old Party leaders, all accused of terrorism against the state. The trial began on August 19, and on August 25, all of the defendants were sentenced to death, and executed in the middle of the night.

The Trial of the Sixteen was the first of four "show trials," organized by Stalin to eliminate the Old Bolsheviks, those who had been with the Party since the beginning, who knew its history and inner workings, and who might threaten Stalin's seizure of power in the wake of Lenin's death.

Time, distance, the opening of the Soviet Union, and its subsequent collapse have provided historians with enough evidence to determine that the Trials were completely faked. The accusations and the evidence were invented, and the confessions extracted under torture, all under Stalin's orders; the entire series of Trials was designed to remove any Old Bolshevik threats to Stalin's power.⁶ At the time of the Trials, however, the falsification was more difficult to see, and the debate about the Trials raged across Europe and into the Americas.

In France, the Moscow Trials had serious and divergent effects on the French Opposition. Charles Jacquier wrote that the Trials "operated as a developer, in the photographic sense, of the diverse mannerisms of the French Left in the thirties

⁶ The first and most widely accepted account of the Trials and the ensuing Purges is Robert Conquest's *The Great Terror* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), which was first printed in 1968. *The Great Terror* was the first work to comprehensively discuss the purges, and show not only the extent of the fabrication of the evidence but also the incredible numbers of deaths involved. Conquest revised and reprinted the work as new evidence became known; the most recent is the 1990 edition. Conquest commented that as important as the original edition was, the amount of evidence available then was nothing compared to the evidence that became available during *glasnost*. In the 1990 edition, he writes, "over the past three years [since *glasnost* was introduced], not just once, but continually, every falsehood about the period has been ripped to pieces." (488)

situated in relation to the USSR, the crazy approval [of the Trials] by the PCF, and the embarrassed reserve of the SFIO."⁷ Jacquier identified several cadres of the French Left who respond to the Trials – the PCF, the General Confederation of Labor (CGT), the Socialists, the *Ligue des droits de l'homme*, and the intellectuals. Jacquier considered those who wrote to be *de facto* intellectuals, and in this group, he included several French Oppositionists, such as Serge and Alfred Rosmer. Jacquier did not, however, identify the Oppositionist roots of Serge and Rosmer, categorizing them instead under a general heading of the "Left."

However, a closer examination reveals that most of the groups and papers that rallied against the Moscow Trials contain a significant number of Communist Oppositionists. The apparently dead, inactive Communist Opposition has a strong presence during the Moscow Trials, and its members are often the most vocal and active participants in the protests.

The Moscow Trials became an opportune moment for the French Opposition to rally after they were pushed to the sidelines due to their rejection first of the Party and then of Trotsky. Their preferred form of action was the literary; they were most comfortable with the written word and the Trials inspired a literary response. This literary form of resistance took place through an outpouring of intellectual production.

⁷ Charles Jacquier, "La Gauche Française, Boris Souvarine, et les Procès de Moscou," *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, 45(2), April-June 1998, 465. Original French "Les procès de Moscou fonctionnent bien comme un révélateur, au sens photographique, des divers manières don't la gauche française des années trente se situe par rapport à l'URSS, de l'approbation dérilante du PCF, au reserves embarrasses de la SFIO."

Victor Serge wrote that the trial "marked the beginning of the extermination of all the old revolutionary generation."⁸ While Serge himself was safely, if barely, outside of Russia when the trials began, he understood their context and their "crazy falsity":

I am conscious of being the living proof of the *unplanned* character of the first trial and, at the same time, of the crazy falsity of the charges brought up in all the Trials. I had departed from the U.S.S.R. in mid-April, at a time when practically all the accused were already in prison. I had worked with Zinoviev and Trotsky, I was a close acquaintance of dozens of those who were to disappear and be shot, I had been one of the leaders of the Left Opposition in Leningrad and one of its spokesmen abroad, and I had never capitulated. Would I have been allowed to leave Russia, with my skill as a writer and my firm evidence as a witness whose facts were irrefutable, if the extermination-trials had been in the offing? Then too, not one mad accusation had been made against me in the whole course of the Trials; which proved that lies were being spread only about those with no means of defending themselves. The case of Trotsky is different: his was the most brilliant head, which had to be struck down at all costs.⁹

Serge's involvement in the Russian Opposition gave him a familiarity with the circumstances and characters of the trials that other European observers did not have. His imprisonment had been an especially instructive experience; he had witnessed first hand the tangled webs of the Soviet justice system. In his memoirs, he wrote that his repeated interrogations and final examination were "a great help later on, along with what I know from other sources, in enabling me to understand how the great Trials were fabricated."¹⁰ Serge and Trotsky were perhaps the only two people in Europe who fully understood the context of the trials.

⁸ Serge, *Memoirs*, 330.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 331.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 296.

The story of Trotsky's exile has been carefully narrated by many of his most ardent admirers and companions, from Isaac Deutscher to Jean van Heijenoort. One of the most interesting accounts of his exile comes from *The Life and Death of Leon Trotsky*, a collaboration between Victor Serge and Trotsky's widow, Natalya Sedova Trotsky.¹¹ Published, in French, in 1951, the book is a justification of Trotsky's life that comes not from yet another admirer, but from his wife and Serge, who remained one of his closest political friends until they suffered a major disagreement in 1939.¹²

In 1933, the Trotskys were offered asylum by the French government, led by Daladier. They were forbidden from entering Paris, and were forced to remain very much unnoticeable. In his diary, which he kept during most of 1935, Trotsky wrote that his "contacts with life are almost entirely limited to the newspapers and partly to letters."¹³ The conditions of his exile were very strict, and he was absolutely forbidden from involving himself in any political action. His diary is filled with feverish analyses of articles and other writings that he picks up, but almost no mention is made of meetings, or of correspondence. Many of the French allies they made in Prinkipo were now no longer friendly to Trotsky, and the rule against travel into Paris made it difficult for Trotsky to establish new French contacts. Often he and

¹¹ Victor Serge and Natalya Sedova Trotsky, *The Life and Death of Leon Trotsky*, trans. Arnold J. Pomerans (New York: Basic Books Inc, 1975). Hereafter cited as Serge and Trotsky.

¹² Trotsky wrote to Serge on 6 May 1939: "I have not lost the hope of seeing you return to the path of the Fourth International. But, at present, you are its adversary, and a hostile one at that, who nevertheless tries to insist on being treated as a political friend." *Serge-Trotsky Papers*.

¹³ Leon Trotsky, *Trotsky's Diary in Exile, 1935*, trans. Elena Zarudnaya (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), 3.

his wife were forced to live incognito; for a time he shaved his beard "so as to look like a middle-class French intellectual."¹⁴

Their stay in France was far from peaceful, and after two restless, isolated years, they managed to secure passage to Oslo, Norway, where they lived from 1935 to 1937 with their old friend Konrad Knudsen. When news of the trials arrived in Western Europe, Trotsky and his wife were taking a vacation with Knudsen in the Norwegian countryside, listening to the radio.¹⁵ They picked up a news bulletin announcing the opening of the trial of the "Trotskyist-Zinovievist Centre." Trotsky's widow recalled that Trotsky was "like a man in a delirium during those days," before the trial, "as if plunged into an insane nightmare. [The Party's] headlong descent into the abyss completely bewildered him."¹⁶

The first trial began on August 19, 1936, and ended a week later. The Trial of the Sixteen, led by prosecutor Andrei Vyshinsky, accused all the sixteen defendants, of participating in an enormous international terrorist ring, headed by Trotsky, which plotted to assassinate the most prominent members of the Soviet Government, beginning with Sergei Kirov, who had been assassinated in 1934, and ending Stalin himself. In his collaboration with Trotsky's widow, Victor Serge notes that while sixteen were actually tried, fifty men were mentioned in the indictment. Those who were tried "were the only ones who had agreed to confess whatever was demanded of them. The others were never heard of again."¹⁷

¹⁴ Serge and Trotsky, *The Life and Death of Leon Trotsky*, 192.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 201.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 202.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

The second trial, the Trial of the Seventeen, was convened on January 23, 1937. The Trial of the Seventeen's most prominent defendants were Karl Radek, who had been involved with the Left Opposition but had later returned to the Party, Yuri Piatakov, and Grigori Sokolnikov, along with fourteen other Old Bolsheviks. Thirteen were found guilty and executed, and four received sentences in labor camps. Radek was among those who were sent to the labor camps; he avoided execution by confessing his knowledge of several other "cadres" of Trotskyists lurking both in Moscow and abroad, including Nikolai Bukharin and General Mikhail Tukhachevsky.

Tukhachevsky was next to be tried, along with seven other Red Army officers. Their trial, unlike the two that preceded them, was a secret trial, in the summer of 1937. Tukhachevsky and his fellow officers were accused of espionage for Germany and of forming another Trotskyite conspiracy, and all were convicted and executed.

The final trial was once again a public show trial. The Trial of the Twenty-One, or the "Bloc of Rightists and Trotskyites," included Bukharin, Alexei Rykov, the former head of the NKVD Genrikh Yagoda, Nikolai Krestinsky, Khristian Rakovsky, Vladimir Ivanov, Mikhail Chernov, and fifteen other former members of the Soviet government.

The Trial of the Twenty-One tied all of the loose threads of the other trials together. It was the longest trial, lasting from March 2 to March 13, and it was the most contentious, most dramatic of all of the trials. News of the Trials had spread across Europe to America by the time the Trial of the Twenty-One began, and it involved more men, many of them extremely prominent Party members. The drama began when all the defendants pleaded guilty immediately, except Nikolai Krestinsky,

who declared "I have never been a Trotskyite, I have never belonged to the bloc of Rights and Trotskyites and have not committed a single crime."¹⁸ The next morning he appeared in court with a dislocated shoulder and changed his plea to "guilty," explaining that the previous morning, he had been "under the influence of a momentary keen feeling of false shame, evoked by the atmosphere of the dock and the painful impression created by the public reading of the indictment, which was aggravated by [his] poor health."¹⁹ At the end of the trial, every original member of the Politburo, under Lenin, had been executed or imprisoned in labor camps, with the exception of Stalin himself, and Trotsky, who remained safely abroad.

Increasing pressure from Stalin on the Norwegian government made it difficult for Trotsky to remain in Norway. He was put under house arrest by the Norwegian government in early 1937 until he eventually secured asylum in Mexico, where he lived with Frieda Kahlo and Diego Rivera in their villa in Coyoacán from 1937 to 1940. In the fall of 1937, Trotsky hosted the Dewey Commission, an American-led international committee of inquiry created to investigate the truth of the trials.

In *The Life and Death of Leon Trotsky*, Serge writes, "It is typical of American society that all those major political trials which have ended in unjust verdicts have aroused energetic and tenacious protest movements in the United States.... The Moscow Trials and the persecution of one of the old revolutionaries, now outlawed, aroused a wave of sympathy and protest throughout the world but

¹⁸ People's Commissariat of Justice of the U.S.S.R., *Report of Court Proceedings in the Case of the Anti-Soviet 'Bloc of Rights and Trotskyites' Heard Before The Military Collegium of the Supreme Court of the U.S.S.R., Moscow, March 2-13, 1938*. (New York: Howard Fertig, Inc., 1988), 36.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 157.

nowhere more strongly and effectively than in the United States."²⁰ The American Committee had the highest international profile of any of the protest movements, most probably because of its committee of inquiry, the Dewey Commission. The Commission met for a week in Coyoacán, holding thirteen hearings in total, during which they examined and cross-examined Trotsky. In the end, they concluded that Trotsky was not guilty. Though this ruling had little effect on the outcome of the trials, it was a very public forum and allowed Trotsky to defend himself to an international audience, which he had not yet had the opportunity to do. For this reason, as well as for the impressive list of participants, led by John Dewey, for whom the commission was named, the American Committee for the Defense of Leon Trotsky is one of the best-remembered organized protests to the Moscow Trials.²¹

The Dewey Commission was not the only international commission of inquiry, however. It was predated by the *Comité pour l'enquête sur les procès de Moscou et pour la défense de la liberté d'opinion dans la Révolution* (Committee for Inquiry into the Moscow Trials and for the Defense of Freedom of Opinion in the Revolution), which began in Paris in October 1936.²² While the American Committee, as Serge suggested, was organized out of a general sense of injustice and unfairness in regards to the Trials, the French *Comité* had deeper connections to the Trials themselves. Unlike in America, where communism was not so closely

²⁰ Serge and Trotsky, *The Life and Death of Leon Trotsky*, 220.

²¹ For more insight into the Dewey Commission, consult some of the Commission's publications, including Preliminary Commission of Inquiry, John Dewey, *The Case of Leon Trotsky; Report of Hearings on the Charges Made Against Him in the Moscow Trials* (New York: Merit Publishers, 1937).

²² Serge, *Memoirs*, 331.

connected to the Soviet Party, France was very closely connected to the struggle raging in the Soviet Union.

The *Comité* emerged out of an *Appel aux Hommes* (Call to Men) petition that appeared in *La Lutte ouvrière*, the journal of the *Parti Ouvrière Internationale*, on 20 October, 1936. The "Appel" was written as a petition to "all men from every party who call themselves devoted to the liberation of workers, to all those, whatever their particular ideologies, who only recognize human progress when it honestly improves social justice and the dignity of man."²³ The signers called for the formation of an international commission of inquiry, "absolutely free, presented with all documents, able to call all witnesses," and designed to examine the trials in perfect detail, to expose the truth. "We simply demand the most elementary justice."²⁴

The "Appel" was in response to the behavior of the *Ligue des droits de l'homme* (League of the Rights of Man, LDH), which had previously been the organization on the French Left most involved with the Moscow Trials. The *Ligue*, founded by Ludovic Trarieux in 1898, emerged at the height of the Dreyfus Affair to defend Alfred Dreyfus, and since the Dreyfus Affair, the LDH had become more concerned with human rights in general.²⁵ It periodically attracted former Communist

²³ Magdeleine Paz, Maurice Paz, and signers, *Appel aux hommes*, Petition. *La Lutte ouvrière*, 20 October 1936. French Subject Collection, Box 27, Folder titled "Procès de Moscou," Hoover Institution Archives. The original French: "hommes de tous les parties qui se disent dévoués à la libération des travailleurs, à tous ceux, quelles que soient leurs idéologies particulières, qui ne reconnaissent de progress humains que lorsque sont authentiquement accrues la justice sociale et a dignité de l'homme."

²⁴ *Ibid.* The original French: "absolument libre, disposant de tous documents, pouvant faire comparaître tous témoins"

²⁵ Aristide Rieffel Collection, Box 14, Envelope 5, titled "La Ligue des droits de l'homme." Hoover Institution Archives.

Party intellectuals, such as the feminist activist Séverine.²⁶ The LDH had often been in opposition to the Communist Party, beginning with the LDH's criticism of the Brest-Litovsk Treaty in December 1917, which took the new Soviet Union out of World War One. The LDH continued to protest what it perceived to be the growing dictatorship of the Bolshevik Party. In 1922, the LDH objected to Stalin's aggressive militancy in Georgia, as well as the Bolsheviks' elaborate show trial against a group of Social Revolutionaries. These challenges were too much for the Party, and at the Fourth Comintern Congress, membership in the LDH was declared incompatible with Party membership.²⁷

The LDH remained critical of the Party while reaffirming its commitment to human rights. The Moscow Trials, however, struck a particularly strong cord with the LDH. The connection between the elaborate trials in Moscow, with their mysteriously complacent and unanimous confessions, could not have evaded the notice of a *Ligue* that began during one of the first modern government-sanctioned miscarriage of justice, the Dreyfus trial. After the conclusion of the Trial of the Sixteen, the LDH's president, Victor Basch, proposed the adoption of a resolution that would "translate [the *Ligue's*] anxiety" about the trials.²⁸ However, the other members of the LDH's Bureau disagreed, fearing that such a proposal might create dissension among members. As a compromise, the LDH asked Raymond Rosenmark, a former judicial counselor to the Soviet Embassy in Paris, to conduct a report of the trials. Rosenmark published his report in the LDH journal, *Cahiers des droits de l'homme*. M.

²⁶ Cauter, *Communism and the French Intellectuals*, 88.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 89.

²⁸ Quoted in Jacquier, "La Gauche Française," 456. Original French: "Le président de la Ligue des droits de l'homme, Victor Basch, avait proposé «l'adoption d'une résolution traduisant ses angoisses»."

Rosenmark concluded that "I feel that to doubt the sincerity of the confessions would be in this circumstance an absolute failure of scientific thought and contrary to all of the rules in terms of the proof."²⁹

Rosenmark's report provoked great outrage among the French Opposition. Magdeleine Paz attempted to publish a critical, detailed rebuttal of Rosenmark's report in the *Cahiers*, but the journal refused to publish her article. In response, Paz and several dozen other intellectuals assembled a petition, the "Appel aux hommes," calling for the establishment of an objective, international commission of inquiry. The "Appel aux hommes" petition raised over two thousand signatures in its first few months. The success of the petition prompted the organization of *the Comité pour l'enquête sur le Procès de Moscou et pour la défense de la Liberté d'opinion dans la Révolution*.³⁰ The second part of the title was suggested by Victor Serge, who also wanted the *Comité* to "have the task of defending, within the Spanish Revolution, those whom Soviet totalitarianism would attempt to liquidate in Madrid and Barcelona by the same methods of lying and murder."³¹ Serge's insistence, and the *Comité's* acceptance, of the Spanish element to their task distinguish the French *Comité* from its American sibling. While the American Committee was specifically devoted to the defense of Trotsky, the French *Comité* had larger goals in mind.

Another point of distinction lies in their motivation. According to Serge, the American Committee was formed primarily from an American instinct to right the wronged and protest unjust verdicts. The French *Comité*, on the other hand, formed

²⁹ Jacquier, "La Gauche Française," 460.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 461. To distinguish the French committee from the American, I will henceforth refer to the American as the American Committee, and the French as the *Comité*.

³¹ Serge, *Memoirs*, 331.

partially from the same sentiment, but also from a deeper link to another injustice in French memory – the Dreyfus Affair. As a supplement to the *Comité's* first Informational Bulletin, Leon Sedov, Trotsky's son, wrote an open letter to the *Ligue des droits de l'homme* in which he writes, "When I demanded to be heard [by you], I did not believe I was dealing with an anti-Dreyfusard Ligue."³² The link between the Dreyfus Affair and the Moscow Trials is especially clear in a pamphlet published by the *Comité* in June 1937 titled *The Ligue of the Dreyfus Affair In Front Of the Moscow Trials*. The pamphlet is harshly critical of the LDH. The decision to refer to the *Ligue* as the "Ligue of the Dreyfus Affair," is an editorial choice that highlights the similarities between the two cases, and makes a subtle jibe –the *Ligue* that was formed during the Dreyfus Affair, according to the authors of the pamphlet, ought to be more aware of the falsity of the trials. Later on in the pamphlet, the authors, identified as Félicien Challaye, Michel Alexandre, L. Emery, and G. Michon, write that , "The *Ligue* did not take a public position in front of what millions consider to be an enormous Dreyfus Affair."³³ On the back of the pamphlet, the authors published the article Paz planned on publishing in the *Cahiers*, in which she details the mistakes

³² Leon Sedov, "Au Comité Central de la Ligue des Droits de l'Homme et à la Ligue," published as a supplement to the first monthly bulletin of the *Comité pour l'enquête sur les Procès de Moscou et pour la défense de la Liberté d'opinion dans la Révolution*, French Subject Collection, Box 27, Envelope titled "Procès de Moscou," Hoover Institution Archives. Original French: "Lorsque j'ai demandé à être entendu, je n'ai pas cru avoir affaire à une Ligue d'esprit anti-dreyfusard."

³³ Félicien Challaye, et. al., *La Ligue de l'Affaire Dreyfus Devant Les Procès de Moscou*, pamphlet, Paris, 27 June 1937, French Subject Collection, Box 27, Folder titled "Procès de Moscou", Hoover Institution Archives. Original French: "La Ligue n'a pris publiquement position devant ce que des millions d'hommes considèrent comme une immense Affaire Dreyfus."

that Rosenmark made in his report, exposing his conclusions as false and careless.³⁴

In connecting the Moscow Trials with the Dreyfus Affair, the French Opposition brought a unique understanding to the discussion of the Trials, as well as a unique way to approach the Trials.

Paz was not the only member of the *Comité* who belonged to the French Communist Opposition. Serge also participated in the *Comité*, as did Alfred Rosmer and his wife. Other members of the *Comité* had been Party members at one point or another, such as Georges Pioch and Marcel Martinet, but none had so explicit a connection to the French Opposition as Paz, Serge, and Rosmer.

The *Comité* published pamphlets frequently over the course of the trials. One informational pamphlet was titled *For the Truth of the Moscow Trials! 18 Questions, 18 Responses*. The pamphlet was printed during the latter half of 1937, after the Trial of the Seventeen concluded. The authors outlined the most common rumors about the trials – the supposed links between Hitler and the defendants, the elaborate terrorist plots against Stalin, the formation of a large international Trotskyist terrorist organization. The pamphlet ends with a plea to its readers in the form of the final question, "What are the tasks of all the workers attached to the socialist cause, of all the men devoted to justice and truth?" The answer, the pamphlet offers, is for "all men of good will":

... take the defense of those who are socialists, anarchists, communists, and without any party who are persecuted in the USSR for crimes of opinion, to demand with us the liberation of thousands of oppositionists of every sort who have been

³⁴ Magdeleine Paz, "En Marge du procès de Moscou," 27 June 1937. Published with *La Ligue de l'Affaire Dreyfus Devant Les Procès de Moscou*, cited previously. French Subject Collection, Box 27, Folder titled "Procès de Moscou," Hoover Institution Archives

imprisoned for eight years or more, to demand with us in the name of all the Russian workers the freedom of thought, speech, and socialist action.³⁵

The Comité also published a monthly *Bulletin*, to which a reader could receive a ten issue subscription for six francs. During the Dewey Commission investigations, the *Bulletin* often translated the Commission's findings into French. The Comité, however, was not merely a European voice for the Dewey Commission and the American Committee. Many of their *Bulletins* discussed issues specific to the French Comité. Leon Sedov's open letter is an example, as is their first *Bulletin* as a whole. In the first issue, they discuss the formation of the Comité, as well as the success of their first meeting, which was attended by over two thousand people.³⁶ The Comité was an active organization independent of its American counterpart, though the American Committee receives more attention in historical accounts of the period, most likely because the American Committee oversaw the Dewey Commission.

The Oppositionists on the *Comité* were among the most productive of the members. The *Comité* published pamphlets frequently over the course of the trials,

³⁵ Comité pour l'enquête sur le procès de Moscou et pour la défense de la liberté d'opinion dans la révolution, *Pour la vérité sur les procès de Moscou! 18 Questions, 18 Réponses*, Pamphlet, 1937, 13. French Subject Collection, Box 27, Folder titled "Procès de Moscou," Hoover Institution Archives. The original French: "Nous invitons tous les hommes de bonne volonté à prendre la défense des socialistes, des syndicalistes, des anarchistes, des communistes et des sans-parti persécutés en U.R.S.S. pour délit d'opinion; à exiger avec nous la libération des milliers d'opposants de toutes nuances emprisonnés depuis huit ans et plus; à exiger avec nous pour tous les travailleurs russes les libertés de pensée, de parole et d'action socialiste."

³⁶ Comité pour l'enquête sur le Procès de Moscou et pour la défense de la Liberté d'opinion dans la Révolution, *Bulletin mensuel d'Information et de Presse*, January 1937, 2. Leon Trotsky Collection, Box 26, Folder 2, Hoover Institution Archives. Charles Jacquier identifies the number as 3,000 in "La Gauche Française", 461.

and Paz, Serge, or Rosmer authored most of them. Serge and Rosmer were particularly active outside of the *Comité*.

Rosmer wrote and edited dozens of pamphlets, in which he repeatedly proved the innocence of the accused in Moscow. Rosmer had an acute understanding of the situation in Moscow, due to his long involvement in the Party and then the Opposition, as well as his close friendship with Trotsky. He acknowledged, before most others involved were willing to acknowledge it, that Stalin was unlikely to take the words of an International Committee of Inquiry to heart and put a stop to the trials. To assume so, he wrote, "is to poorly understand Stalin."³⁷

In another article, he asked, "What are the Moscow Trials? What do they mean?"

We might invoke, in this connection, the grand political trials of the past, the ones in the background, of yesterday, the Inquisition, the witch trials, the "plots" invented by dictatorial governments to remove dangerous adversaries. [The Moscow Trials], have, in effect, common traits with each of these methods of execution summarily and systematically perpetrated under the cover of a strict application of the rules of justice. But by other [traits], important ones, they are different, notably by the unbelievable, monstrous character, the accusations, and especially the attitude of the accused.³⁸

³⁷ Alfred Rosmer, *L'Assassinat d'Ignace Reiss*, pamphlet, 14 April 1938. Library of Social History, Box 69, Envelope 1 (Pamphlets), Hoover Institution Archives. It is notable that Rosmer predicted yet another trial in April 1938. The last of the show trials concluded in March of that year, though the purges continued well into the early 1940s. Rosmer, however, did not possess the benefit of such hindsight, and it is natural that he assumed more trials were to follow, each more unbelievable than the last. The original French: "C'était mal connaître Staline."

³⁸ Alfred Rosmer, "«Procès de Moscou»", *Civilisation nouvelle*, No. 2 (July-September 1938). French Subject Collection, Box 27, Folder titled "Procès de Moscou," Hoover Institution Archives. Original French: "On a pu évoquer, à leur propos, les grands procès politiques du passé, les uns lointains, d'autres d'hier, l'Inquisition, les procès de sorcelleri, les "complots" fabriqués par les gouvernements de dictature pour se débarrasser d'adversaires dangereux. Ils ont en effet des traits communs avec chacun de ces modes d'exécution sommaires et systématiques perpétrées sous le couvert d'une stricte application des règles de

The French Opposition has disappeared from most histories of French Communism by the time the scholars arrive at the Moscow Trials. It is at this moment, however, that the French Opposition was the most active. The Moscow Trials became an opportune moment for the French Opposition to rally after they were pushed to the sidelines by their rejection first of the Party and then of Trotsky. Their preferred form of action was the literary; they were most comfortable with the written word.

Victor Serge is an especially strong example of the literary nature of the Opposition reaction to the trials. During the period of the Moscow Trials, Serge wrote prolifically.³⁹ In 1938, he published a collection of poems, *Resistance*, most of which he had composed in Russia. When crossing the border, his manuscripts were stolen by the GPU, so he constructed his poems from memory. The poems in *Resistance* are poems of loss and betrayal. In the three-part "History of Russia," he writes, to Russia,

If you betray yourself, what can we do but betray ourselves with
you?
After lives such as these, what possible death could there be, if
not, in this betrayal, to die for you?⁴⁰

Serge felt the effects of the Trials and of Stalin's betrayal of Lenin's vision deeply. His love of Russia made the pain of the betrayal all the more acute. The Trials were merely the culmination of several year's worth of suffering and frustration, which began when Serge first joined the Russian Opposition and was punished for it.

justice. Mais par d'autres, importants, ils en diffèrent, notamment par le caractère monstrueux, incroyable, des accusations et surtout par l'attitude des accusés."

³⁹ Weissman, *Victor Serge*, 197.

⁴⁰ Victor Serge, "History of Russia, III: Confessions," *Resistance*, trans. James Brook (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1989), 23.

Serge experienced the Moscow Trials on a deeply personal, emotional level. He was not, however, the only French Oppositionists to feel the effects of the Trials closely. The other French Oppositionists on the *Comité* also encountered the Trials in a much more *real* way than the other, non-Oppositionist members of the *Comité*.

During his confession in the final Moscow Trial, the Trial of the Twenty-One, Krestinsky mentioned a rendezvous he had in Berlin with Magdeleine Paz and Alfred Rosmer in 1928. According to his confession, he was to hand off money to Rosmer and Paz to help further the Trotskyist alliance with Nazi Germany.⁴¹ The confession was completely false, but the mention of Paz and Rosmer spurred some controversy in the French press, enough for a Parisian journal, *Paris-Soir*, to send a copy of the confession to both Paz and Rosmer and request a response. Rosmer and Paz responded immediately. Rosmer wrote that "I did not go to Berlin at any time in the year 1928. I never went and I never met Magdeleine Paz in Berlin. I never visited Krestinsky in Berlin." He continues, "The 'technique' of the 'Moscow Trials' is very well known. One of its characteristics is the deliberate will to avoid all that might resemble a sincere search for the truth." Paz wrote, "That is pure insanity. ... I was not in Berlin in 1928." She continues, "I am persuaded it is because during the first

⁴¹ In the transcript of the trial, the prosecutor, Vyshinsky, asks Krestinsky, in the middle of a story about Krestinsky's participation in the Trotskyists' secret dealings with the Nazis, "Have you been a Trotskyite all the time?" Krestinsky replies, "Yes. I told Maslow that I had no money for him, but that I had some for Rosmer and Madeleine Paz. Ten days later he telephoned and said that Madeleine Paz had arrived and that she was stopping at the Hotel "Excelsior." I met her there and gave her the money." *Report of Court Proceedings in the Case of the Anti-Soviet 'Bloc of Rights and Trotskyites' Heard Before The Military Collegium of the Supreme Court of the U.S.S.R., Moscow, March 2-13, 1938*, 36.

trial, I took a very clear position against the barbarism, that we found ourselves facing in this grotesque fable."⁴²

Unlike most Western critics of the Trials, Rosmer and Paz, the Communist Oppositionists, were singled out for mention and thrust into the spotlight. Krestinsky's confession was false; the most likely reason for mention of Rosmer and Paz was their support and involvement in the Communist Opposition. This gives the French Communist Opposition, so often supposed to be invisible or irrelevant, a very real weight. The situation of Paz and Rosmer is in a way analogous to the trials of the French literary fascists that David Carroll discusses in his *French Literary Fascism*. Though politically, the literary fascists are complete opposites of Rosmer and Paz, their situations are similar. In *French Literary Fascism*, Carroll describes the trial of Lucien Rebatet, who was simultaneously a "sophisticated connoisseur and critic of art, music, literature, and cinema," and "one of the most militant and vicious anti-Semites among the French literary fascists."⁴³ Rebatet fled France in August 1944, but was arrested in Germany in 1945. He was convicted and sentenced to death in 1946, but in 1947, the sentence was commuted to life in prison. Rebatet's virulent anti-Semitic, pro-Nazi writings earned him his sentence; that is, he was tried for his

⁴² Alfred Rosmer, "« Je ne suis pas allé à Berlin en 1928 » ... nous dit M. Alfred Rosmer." Magdeleine Paz, "« C'est de la pure démente. Je n'ai pas été à Berlin en 1928 » ... nous déclare Mme Magdeleine Paz." *Paris-Soir*, 6 Mars 1938. French Subject Collection, Box 27, Folder titled "Procès de Moscou," Hoover Institution Archives. Rosmer, original French: "Je ne suis allé à Berlin à aucun moment de l'année 1928. Je n'ai jamais été ni ne me suis jamais rencontré à Berlin avec Madeleine Paz. Je n'ai jamais rendu visite à Krestinski à Berlin. ... La 'technique' des 'procès de Moscou' est maintenant bien connue. Une de ses caractéristiques reside dans la volonté délibérée d'éviter tout ce qui pourrait ressembler à une recherche sincère de la vérité." Paz, original French: "C'est de la pure démente. ... Je n'ai pas été à Berlin en 1928. ... Je suis persuadée que c'est parce que, dès le premier procès, j'ai pris très nettement position contre la barbarie, que nous trouvons en face de cette fable grotesque."

⁴³ David Carroll, *French Literary Fascism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 13.

literary politics, not for any organizational affiliation. In much the same way, though with entirely different politics involved, Paz and Rosmer were in a sense put on trial and forced to defend their own literary politics in the face of the "barbarism" of the Moscow Trials. As Communist Oppositionists, they experienced very real ramifications for their literary politics.

In many ways, the Moscow Trials provided the perfect platform for the French Opposition. The very act of writing became a political action. Serge, Paz, and Rosmer are all examples of the physical effects of intellectual pursuits. In other ways, however, the balance between theory and action, between literature and politics, remained a struggle to achieve, because the ultimate goal of the French Communist Opposition was to achieve a position in which literature could be just as viable a form of political engagement as protesting and meetings. As Serge points out, too often their writing in response to the Trials felt like so many "voices crying out in the wilderness."⁴⁴

This problem, of relating theoretical desires to effective action, is similar to the problem faced by the Western Marxists, who were beginning to emerge during the 1930s and 1940s, just as the Communist Opposition began to fade away.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's 1955 *Adventures of the Dialectic* defined Western Marxism as:

... a subterranean tradition of humanist, subjectivist and undogmatic Marxism that was the negation of its official Soviet (or Eastern) counterpart. The latter had been turned into a doctrinaire ideology of legitimation by a tyrannical regime, whereas Western Marxism, nowhere in power, had retained the libertarian, emancipatory hopes of the socialist tradition. ...

⁴⁴ Serge, *Memoirs*, 331.

Western Marxism recognized its true origins in the tradition of philosophical critique that began with Kant and German Idealism.⁴⁵

Its members were a close group, those who followed in the wake of Georg Lukács, Antonio Gramsci, Karl Korsch, and Ernst Bloch – Sartre, Adorno, Benjamin, Henri Lefebvre, and Merleau-Ponty, and others. Lukács and the other founders insisted on Marx's debt to Hegel, and so the Western Marxism that emerged from this group was often equated with Hegelian Marxism.⁴⁶

This traditional definition was revised with the publication of Perry Anderson's *Considerations on Western Marxism* in 1976. Anderson suggested that the traditional cadre of Western Marxists be expanded to include not only the critical (Hegelian) but also the scientific (anti-Hegelian) trends of Marxism. "The most obvious common denominator" among this expanded group was their origins; "all were born or came of intellectual age in continental Western Europe."⁴⁷

Martin Jay borrows from Anderson's work in his 1984 *Marxism and Totality*, in which he examines themes of totality and unity in the development of Western Marxist thought. In introducing his work, Jay relies on several of Anderson's key theoretical arguments. Of particular interest is an idea that Anderson suggests and on which Jay expands, that of a generational shift in the focus of the Western Marxists, and their perception of the link between theory and practice. Anderson identifies three groups of Western Marxists: the first group was born between 1885 and 1900, and

⁴⁵ Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 2.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

radicalized by the First World War, including Gramsci, Bloch, Lukács, and Benjamin; those in the second group were born after 1900 and radicalized in the interwar period or during the Second World War, including Lefebvre, Adorno, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty; those in the third group were born after the First World War, and were radicalized after the Second, including Jürgen Habermas. Anderson suggests that, "the earliest group tended to find a closer link between its theory and political practice than the later ones;" the further away from Marx they grew, the less cohesive they became.⁴⁸ Jay expands on this suggestion:

During the era of the Second International, many Marxists thought they had discovered the means to [forge that link], although of course there were serious clashes over the organizational and tactical form which theoretically directed practice was to take. Western Marxism, like Leninism, grew out of a disillusionment with the results of the Second International's theory-practice nexus. But whereas Leninism tended to change its practice without seriously questioning the theory it had inherited, Western Marxism understood the need to revise both. For while recognizing that there had indeed been a connection between theory and practice before 1914, the Western Marxists argued that it was a most unfortunate one.⁴⁹

This theory-praxis gap is one with which the French Oppositionists were familiar. Despite the physical consequences of the Opposition position that members such as Paz and Rosmer experienced, the Opposition remained concerned about how to best relay their message to the masses, the ever-desirable, ever-elusive "proletariat." Jay notes this difficulty in the Western Marxists as well. "Rather than attempt to present their theories in a manner easily accessible to uneducated minds, they almost invariably wrote in a style whose complexity defied popular

⁴⁸ Jay, *Marxism and Totality*, 6. See Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (New York: Verso, 1976).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

comprehension." In general, he notes, "they spoke to a relatively circumscribed audience of intellectuals, or to a mass public yet to be created."⁵⁰

Despite these obvious similarities between the troubles facing the Western Marxists and the Oppositionists, the methods of resolution between the two groups vary widely, and this difference is why a distinction must be made between the two. The Western Marxists were acutely aware of the gap between their theory and their practice, and they made repeated attempts to close it. The Western Marxists "rarely, if ever, deluded themselves into believing that theirs was a time in which the unity of theory and practice was easily achieved."⁵¹ Despite the many attempts they made to resolve their faults, the Western Marxists were continually aware of their failure.

The Oppositionists were similar to the Western Marxists in that they recognized that their work did not have the mass effect they intended. Serge's "voices calling out into the wilderness" were not the only expressions of frustration. However, they still preferred a literary form of political engagement, believing that through the continued production of Oppositionists works, the proletariat would become increasingly aware of the right communist path. They did not attempt to rationalize their theory "as a form of non-resigned practice," as Adorno and Horkheimer attempted to do, but neither did they delude themselves "into believing that theirs was a time in which the unity of theory and practice was easily achieved." Rather, they occupied a space in-between; they were not as painfully self-aware as the Western Marxists, but they were more involved in their work, because they saw it as a viable form of engagement.

⁵⁰ Jay, *Marxism and Totality* 12.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

The Western Marxists feared that by failing to unite their theory and practice, they would be rendered meaningless and forgotten. The Oppositionists had no such fear, but perhaps, if they had, their historical fate might have been different. The Moscow Trials marked the slow erasure of the Oppositionists from the annals of history.

Modern historians, when writing about the Trials, or the political climate that preceded them, most often view the period through the lens of the Trials. Trotsky became the focus for opposition to the trials abroad; the largest venues for criticism and analysis most often went through Trotsky or a Trotsky-related group; the Dewey Commission and the American Committee of Inquiry are one example among many. Amidst the furor over the Trials and the publicity of Trotsky's involvement in the West, the French Opposition had found the perfect moment to exercise the form of literary politics they had adopted. Despite the Opposition's active engagement in the Trials, the undertaking could not avoid domination by Trotsky and his movement. At this moment, overshadowed by Trotsky, the French Communist Opposition began to disappear.

O rain of stars in the darkness,
constellation of dead brothers!

I owe you my blackest silence,
my resolve, my indulgence
for all those empty-seeming days,
and whatever is left me of pride
for a blaze in the desert.

But let there be silence
on these lofty figureheads!
The ardent voyage continues,
the course is set on hope.

When will it be your turn, when mine?

The course is set on hope.

— Excerpted from
"Constellation of Dead
Brothers," by Victor Serge

CONCLUSION

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Towards a New Form of Political Engagement
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This thesis has traced the development of the French Opposition's brand of literary politics from the beginning of the Communist Party to the Moscow Trials of 1936 to 1938. During the first years after the 1924 exodus of Oppositionists from the French Communist Party, the Opposition first attempted to push the Communist Party towards reform. Some Oppositionists, such as Alfred Rosmer and Henri Monatte, managed to stay within the Party until late 1924, and during the last few months of their membership they lobbied intensively within the Party to resist the increasingly restrictive policies that the Communist International imposed on its member Parties. The movement for structural reform was a failure, however, because the French Party was too closely tied to the Comintern to accept the protests of the Opposition. The Party went as far as changing its name, from the *Section Française de l'Internationale Communiste* to the more direct *Parti Communiste Français*. The effect of the name change was to distance the Party from its messy past with the Opposition, and to reestablish ideological homogeneity and stability.

The Opposition then flirted briefly with Trotsky and his International Left Opposition movement (ILO), which he organized from his exile in Prinkipo, Turkey. Despite Trotsky's hopes that the French Opposition would prove a valuable resource and ally, many of the leading figures of the Opposition quickly broke with Trotsky, finding the rigid structure of the ILO distasteful. By 1932, the Opposition had

completely broken with Trotsky, though some members, such as Alfred Rosmer, maintained a friendly relationship with Trotsky and his wife.

Independent of both the PCF and the ILO, the French Opposition found itself with a limited range of political motion. The Opposition instead turned to writing as a form of political expression. As the Opposition grew, its members established numerous journals and other publications. The movement began developing a form of literary politics, in which political writing and intellectual production became a legitimate form of political engagement.

This new form of literary politics was first put to the test during the "Victor Serge Affair." Serge, once a member of the early French communists movements in his youth, had moved to the new Soviet Union in 1917. He remained in the Soviet Union for years, acting as a correspondent to various French newspapers and participating in Soviet politics. He joined the Russian Opposition after Lenin's death in 1924, and soon found himself in prison for his political views. The first imprisonment lasted only eight weeks, but the second began in 1933 and lasted until early 1936. For most of his sentence, he was in exile in Orenberg, in the steppe. His long imprisonment drew the notice of the French Opposition and other members of the French Left, who lobbied loudly for his release. The culmination of the Opposition's protest came at the 1935 International Congress of Writers for the Defense of Culture, during which members of the Opposition stormed the discussion floor and demanded to be heard. Magdeleine Paz made a particularly virulent speech in defense of Victor Serge, and other members protested the persecution of other Oppositionists in Russia and across Europe. News of the protest reached Stalin

through Romain Rolland, and, for fear of an international incident, Stalin released Serge, exiling him into Western Europe.

The Victor Serge Affair and its climax at the Writer's Congress were a catalyst for the cohesion of the Opposition movement, giving its members a cause around which they could rally. The movement solidified its literary political identity, since the Serge Affair protests proved that a group could be literary, and lacking in traditional political structure, and still affect meaningful political change.

The Moscow Trials began several months after Serge's release in the spring of 1936, and the announcement of the trials took the Opposition community by surprise. Though the persecution of the Opposition, both in France and the Soviet Union, was well known, few expected the persecution to take such an open, bloody turn. The confessions of the trials, obviously invented by the prosecution, were shocking in their outrageous falsity. Most of the initial reactions to the Trials were expressions of disbelief, or demands for proof.

By October, several Oppositionists had assembled a large group of other leftist intellectuals outraged by the trials, and together they established the *Comité pour l'enquête sur les procès de Moscou et pour la défense de la liberté d'opinion dans la Révolution*, devoted to investigating the truth of the Trials, and supporting the revolutionaries in the Spanish revolution.

The *Comité* became the perfect platform for the Opposition's protests of the Moscow Trials. Oppositionists in *Comité* were among the group's most active members. Victor Serge, Alfred Rosmer, and Magdeleine Paz penned several dozen

pamphlets between them, in addition to numerous news articles and several longer pieces.

The Moscow Trials inspired a literary form of resistance, and in this environment, the Opposition flourished. However, the Trials also involved the Opposition in a much more dangerous way. The mention of Rosmer and Paz in Krestinsky's falsified confession during the 1938 Trial of the Twenty-One sparked a furor in France. Rosmer and Paz published a strongly worded refutation of Krestinsky's confessions, speculating that their positions as Oppositionists led the Soviet prosecution to include them in the confessions. Rosmer and Paz quickly responded in their own defense, contributing to the growing body of literature disproving the confessions and accusations of the Trials. The Rosmer-Paz controversy has been completely neglected by other historians, but it points to the continued presence of the Opposition, well past the time other historians pronounced it dead. Why do these dominant, erroneous narratives persist?

Robert Wohl, in *French Communism in the Making*, concluded that, "It would be both dreary and long to narrate the history of the [French] Opposition in detail."¹ The "ideology," which had once, according to Wohl, united all Communists, both inside and outside of the Party structure, "had been superseded by a theory of organization." After this switch, "to be a Communist outside the party made no sense."²

¹ Robert Wohl, *French Communism in the Making, 1914-1924* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1966), 425.

² *Ibid.*, 428.

To Wohl, any attempt to define a "Communist" hinges on the relationship between the person in question and the Party structure. When the French Communist Party began turning to a defining "theory of organization," communist opposition to the Party became impossible, because one could not be communist without adhering to the Party structure. The structure itself defined communism.

This narrow definition of communist success is shared by other historians of the period, which explains why the French Opposition has proven so difficult to find in scholarship. By defining communist success as a measure of obedience to the political structure of the Party, historians have constructed a narrow lens through which to view the French communist conflicts of the 1920s and 1930s.

Through this lens, the Opposition quickly fails, because it is neither able to affect structural change, nor is it able to construct a strong political organization, in the style of the PCF, on its own. As a result, Wohl has dated the demise of the Opposition quite early, in 1926. Other historians, such as David Caute or John Paul Gerber, have also adopted this narrow lens of inquiry, and have subsequently found the Opposition as "dreary" as Wohl has.

Towards a new form of political engagement

This thesis has shown that the French Opposition persisted well after most historians pronounced the movement dead, and that the Opposition persisted in an entirely different way from that imagined by Wohl, Caute, Gerber, and others. While the Opposition did not organize into a cohesive political structure, the movement developed a form of literary politics that was ultimately successful. The causes

adopted by the Opposition, such as the Serge Affair or the protest of the Moscow Trials, succeeded in proving that political change could be affected by a predominantly intellectual political movement.

The explanation for this difficulty lies in the language we have constructed to talk about political engagement. What does it mean to succeed politically? It is common to rely on structure as a sign of political success, as Robert Wohl's analysis of the French Communist Opposition shows. If the movement or group in question, such as the PCF or the ILO, has a foundational organizational structure, then it is considered politically legitimate. When a group, such as the French Opposition, lacks this traditional structure, it is seen as a failure. It cannot engage, it cannot participate – it cannot *do* much at all. The group is resigned to irrelevancy, to an existence writing solely for the sake of writing. This at least is the picture presented by historians who consider the story of the French Opposition, in Robert Wohl's words, "dreary and long."

But what if we develop a new way to talk about being political? One in which being literary and being politically engaged are not mutually exclusive, one in which we find not production for the sake of production, but production for the sake of political engagement? In this light, intellectual groups such as the French Opposition can be seen as politically legitimate, despite their lack of cohesive political structure. Then, French Opposition does not die, or suffer a final defeat at the hands of the official Party. Rather, it fades away, dying a natural death over time.

But why bother saving the Opposition at all? What benefit is there in allowing this movement political legitimacy? At points in the process of writing this thesis, I

worried that perhaps the only reason I felt compelled to pursue the history of the French Opposition was out of a "typically American" impulse that Serge described in reference to the Dewey Commission. He wrote, "It is typical of American society that all those major political trials which have ended in unjust verdicts have aroused energetic and tenacious protest movements in the United States."³ Was I merely interested because I found the historical verdict on the French Opposition unjust?

Upon reflection, I have concluded that while a desire to right a historical wrong is certainly present among the reasons for pursuing this thesis to its completion, there are also larger, more important questions that this thesis raises.

If we can adopt a new language of political engagement that legitimizes literary politics instead of dismissing it as irrelevant or uninteresting, the French Communist Opposition is not only rescued from historical neglect, but also becomes part of a longer continuum of literary politics, stretching from the Dreyfus Affair to the present. There are particularly interesting implications in this approach for the French student movement of May 1968, a time when "poetry ruled the streets" and the Communist Opposition movements of the 1930s, including Trotskyism and the French Opposition, experienced a resurgence in popularity. Further study is necessary to fully understand the connection between the French Opposition and the May 1968 movements, but the connection undoubtedly exists. The two movements can be connected together using a framework of French literary politics, in which literary production can have tangible political effects. The possibilities of the connection

³ Victor Serge and Natalya Sedova Trotsky, *The Life and Death of Leon Trotsky*, trans. Arnold J. Pomerans (New York: Basic Books Inc, 1975), 220.

between the French Opposition and May 1968 movement is a compelling argument for developing a way to speak of literary political engagement. Other intellectual movements could benefit from this framework as well, including, perhaps, the modern world of academia.

By understanding the French Opposition not as a "dreary," irrelevant, political failure, but as a successful example of literary political engagement, the "ardent voyage" of the Opposition survives.

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