
Forum

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Political Motives and the 1935 Writers' Congress

To the Editor:

The relation of communism to liberal culture and radical opposition is the real focus of Roger Shattuck and Timothy J. Reiss's disagreement about PMLA's use of a photograph from the 1935 Congress of Writers for the Defense of Culture (Forum, 108 [1993]: 1168–70). The exchange calls for three further comments.

(1) Victor Serge (1890–1947), whose four-year imprisonment by Stalin is one focus of the dispute, is an appropriate emblem of these issues. Belgian-born of Russian parents, he joined the anarchists in Russia who supported the Bolshevik revolution. Opposed to the growing inequality and repression, he allied with Trotsky, was exiled to Stalin's gulag, and was released only after a long European campaign, including the speech Magdeleine Paz is shown making in the photo. (See Serge's *Memoirs of a Revolutionary, 1901–1941*, trans. and ed. Peter Sedgwick [1963; Oxford, 1975], and my *Trotskyism and the Dilemma of Socialism*, with Ronald D. Tabor [Greenwood, 1988].) Though conceding some improprieties at the congress, Reiss argues that it was “neither ‘rigged’ nor ‘steamrollered’” by its Soviet sponsors (1169), as Shattuck charges. Serge's account, too long to quote in full, is flatly at variance with Reiss's. According to Serge, some of his supporters who tried to raise his case were “ejected by the stewards. [Louis] Aragon and [Ilya] Ehrenburg manipulated the assembly in accordance with secret directives. [Henri] Barbusse, Malraux, and Gide presided with some embarrassment.” Serge's case became public only when “Gide, amazed to find that fierce efforts were being made to hush up the dispute, insisted on the ventilation of the matter, and Malraux, who was chairing the session, finally allowed Magdeleine Paz to speak” (*Memoirs* 317–18). Scholarly fairness should have led Reiss to mention this account.

(2) The broader issues in dispute become clear when Reiss argues that many who supported the conference and the liberal-Soviet Popular Front of which it was part “justifiably” saw “the growing strength of a violent Right as a principal menace” and thought the only viable alternative “lay in national and international communism.” He adds that by this time Stalin “was seeking alliance with the Western Left of almost any stripe.” The subject here, plainly, is the viability of the Popular Front, but Reiss raises

all the wrong questions. The relevant issue never was the need for antifascist action, or for revolutionary solutions to Europe's social crisis, which others fought for more consistently than Stalin. Nor was it, as Reiss ingenuously comments, that the European writers at the congress "upheld a traditional liberal line on the value and purpose of literature" (1169)—the congress was organized to gain the support of such figures. The issue is that the Popular Front led many liberals, either naively or out of notions of antifascist unity, to keep quiet about the Soviet persecutions that continued all through this period—a point on which Reiss is stunningly silent. Mandelstam, Babel, and many other writers and artists in Russia; Andrés Nin and other independent revolutionaries, anarchists, and Trotskyists in Spain; and, by 1940, 10–20 million ordinary Soviet citizens compose those who died *after* the Popular Front began. If the needs of this alliance forced congress leaders to let Paz speak and ultimately forced Stalin to let Serge go, Stalin got much, much more in exchange: the silence of most Western progressives on the purges of 1936–39.

(3) Reiss says nothing about Soviet repression and endorses the main premises of the Popular Front as "justifiabl[e]." Such a treatment has topical, not just historical, relevance. Between 1989 and 1991 the Soviet "bloc" and then the Soviet Union itself collapsed; yet today a liberal "market model" based on attacking living standards and raising unemployment has demonstrated its own bankruptcy. Seemingly, it's time for a revival of former communist forces, both in Eastern Europe (as shown, for example, by the September 1993 Polish elections) and in Western Europe and the United States, where Marxist thought and politics were put in some disarray by the events of 1989–91. For such a revival to succeed, ex-communist forces must present themselves as pluralist and social democratic, dedicated to liberal values and cooperation with liberal parties. Hence the need to make the Popular Front look good: for historical justification, such a project naturally turns to the Popular Front period but must present it naively as a principled collaboration between liberals and Stalinists in which no one was abused on either side.

These comments may provide an intellectual context for a seemingly arcane historical debate. The communist-fascist coup attempt in Moscow, under way as I write in October 1993, should make it plain that the issues are not abstract or dead ones. Serge, Mandelstam, Nin, and the rest would cry out from

the grave, if they could, against the act of historical forgetfulness embodied in Reiss's letter.

CHRISTOPHER Z. HOBSON

Hunter College, City University of New York

Reply:

Courtesy rather than merit dictates a reply to Christopher Z. Hobson's ad hominem diatribe. But I must first respond to his slur about a supposed dereliction in intellectual practice. "Scholarly fairness" did not require me to mention any "account," Victor Serge's or anyone else's. My response to Roger Shattuck's letter was just that, a rather short reply to an important objection.

More substantively, Serge's account is not "flatly at variance" with what I wrote about the ejections or about Gide's actions. The tale about "secret directives" is another matter entirely. Aragon's behavior was public. Whether or not he was following any such directives *may* become provable as Moscow files are opened to scholars. It has yet to be proved. Serge was no more at the congress than were the parties to the present debate, and prison neither sanctifies its victims nor gives their words that unique claim to accuracy and truth with which Hobson wants to endow Serge's—especially not when an agenda is being pursued.

Serge's memoirs were hardly disinterested. Nor were the comments by Maksim Gorky, of course, but he took the congress to represent a different position, one wholly at odds with any putative secret directives (although I have no doubt Hobson sees Gorky's expressed dismay as yet another manipulation of befuddled, deluded, or knowingly misguided liberals by subtle schemers of the evil empire). In any case, whether Aragon acted on his beliefs or followed "secret directives" tells nothing at all about the motives of the others present. Hobson, like others who share his convictions, interprets people's actions in the worst light possible.

However Hobson relates the Popular Front to later events has little to do with the 1935 congress. Most participants were certainly—and honestly—making a principled stand against the rise of international fascism. Hobson's Trotskyist opinion that this issue was not relevant would surprise all but a few nonfascists of the time. He might take a look at the (equally futile) efforts made in the follow-up congress during the civil war in Spain. The co-optative power he