

## Michel Winock

### Did Sartre Always Get it Wrong?

The balance sheet looks damning. He has been accused of having been passive under the Occupation, of having compromised himself with totalitarianism, and of being a demagogue for young *gauchistes*. And yet he could sometimes display lucidity and courage. This is his political itinerary.

‘I have never wanted to be involved in politics and I have never voted.’ Jean-Paul Sartre wrote those words on 3 October 1939. He had just been called up into the auxiliary meteorological service and would spend almost the entire ‘phony war’ in Alsace. With a lot of spare time on his hands, he began to write a diary which, although incomplete (the complete text has never been found), was published posthumously under the title *Carnets de la drôle de guerre*.<sup>1</sup> In it, he makes a detailed self-analysis and the text sheds light on his political development.

His outspoken abstentionism is based upon his strong conviction that he must construct his life in complete freedom: ‘I was obsessed with an ideal of being a great man that I had borrowed from romanticism.’ Even as a child, he had felt the need to become ‘a great writer.’ Years went by. He attended the Ecole Normale Supérieure,

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Carnets de la drôle de guerre. Septembre 1939 – mars 1940*, Paris: Gallimard, 1995.

came first in the *agrégation de philosophie* and became a schoolteacher in Le Havre, but always expected to win literary glory. Whilst studying and teaching philosophy, he made a name for himself with *La Nausée* (*Nausea*), the novel he published in 1938, a collection of short stories, *Le Mur* (*The Wall*), published in 1939, and articles in the *Nouvelle Revue Française*.

When war broke out, he was still not a ‘great writer’, and nor was he recognised as a great philosopher but, at the age of thirty-four, he was beginning to make a name for himself. There was a violence to the shattering article on ‘Monsieur François Mauriac et la liberté’ (February 1939) [‘Mr Mauriac and Freedom’] that struck the novelist it criticised as a harsh lesson from a young master with a great future ahead of him. Sartre admitted that his idea of a ‘great life’ ‘basically resembled a career’ (2 December 1939).

At this time, he had no political convictions and regarded the notion of progress as ‘twaddle’. Although he was an individualist with anarchist tendencies, an anti-militarist and above all anti-bourgeois, he still had to find a response to the appeal of the attractions of the Communist Party, which his friend Paul Nizan had joined. He then side-stepped the issue: ‘Basically, I could accept that I was not a communist only if I was able to be to the left of communism’. The question did not actually arise and the Soviet-German pact let him off the hook completely.

In 1936, he had of course sympathised with the Popular Front, but only to the extent of watching the demonstrations from the pavement. He admitted to being uncertain about the surrender at Munich: ‘I was torn between being pro- and anti-Munich, and I have to admit here that I did not have the intellectual courage to be either. Those in favour of Munich made me sick because they were bourgeois and

cowards, and because they feared for their skins, their capital or their capitalism. But those who were against Munich looked frightening to me because they wanted war.'

Just as the pacifist did not campaign for peace, the antimilitarist Sartre unhesitatingly accepted the war. He did so out of personal interest, he wrote: being called up did more to advance his 'individual goal' than the dangers inherent in failing to report as instructed. On other pages of his notebooks, however, he added an ethical explanation: he had to accept the war because he 'would not or could not' avoid it. He had to accept, endure and understand a contingency that had happened, and then elaborated a whole theory based upon his *stoic* acceptance of the war.

Here, he is talking about his ethical motivations and not about politics. When he asks himself what France is fighting, he does not find anti-fascism or the struggle against Nazism very inspiring: after all, the Soviets are on the side of the Axis powers. And if France is fighting to defend Poland, why fight Germany and not Russia, which, together with the Reich, has partitioned Poland? So is France fighting to defend democracy? 'Democracy no longer exists', writes Sartre. The best is yet to come: when Sartre asks himself if he is fighting to defend France against Germany, he comes up with an answer that will not be remembered for its lucidity: 'Hitler said a hundred times that he did not want to attack France.'

As a dedicated warrior (but let's not exaggerate: he was in the meteorological service), Sartre accepts the war without knowing what purpose it serves. Unless, that is, it is there for his benefit: 'War ... is an obscenity that has to be rejected. But we have to reject it (do anything to avoid it) when we are at peace and not when we are at war. If war does break out, we have to plunge into it, because it allows us to live existential. It is a way of realising the existential.'

In order to see how individualistic Sartre's position was at this time, we have only to look at another war diary. Georges Friedman was three years older than Sartre and, like Sartre, a *normalien*, but he was also a Marxist and an anti-Stalinist. On 4 February 1940, he wrote: 'How can Stalinist Communists forget that the future of the working class is bound up with the Western bourgeois democracies' victory over Hitlerism (as they kept telling us for so long)?'

We find the same discrepancy if we look at the attitudes of the man who used to be his 'little comrade' in the rue d'Ulm; Paul Nizan publicly broke with the Communist Party when the USSR invaded Poland and died near Dunkirk on 23 May 1940. We have to conclude that there was nothing precocious about Sartre's political awareness.

## War

According to Simone de Beauvoir, the war, and especially the time Sartre spent in the stalag in Trier, changed everything: 'The war had brought about a decisive conversion in him ... His experience as a prisoner left a profound mark on him; it taught him solidarity and, far from feeling depressed, he took part in the joys of collective life.' The future was no longer a possible to be accepted subjectively. The future 'was socialism', which he now saw as 'a precondition for his own self-fulfilment.'<sup>2</sup>

The idea that a Damascene conversion suddenly took place behind the barbed wire and between the watch towers probably needs some qualification. The witnesses interviewed by Gilbert Joseph when he was researching his devastating book (*Une si douce occupation*) did not exactly see Sartre being converted to 'socialism'.

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<sup>2</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *La Force des choses*, Paris: Gallimard, 1963, pp. 15, 16.

And yet when with the help of a fake medical certificate, Sartre got back to Paris at the beginning of April 1941 and resumed his position as a teacher at the Lycée Pasteur in Neuilly, he, Beauvoir and their friends immediately established a group called ‘Socialisme et liberté’, which planned to resist both Vichy and Nazism. In the course of the summer, Sartre and Beauvoir cycled into the non-occupied zone, where they approached several important people, including André Gide and André Malraux. All declined the invitation to join the group. After the Liberation, this and other episodes helped to give Sartre the reputation of having been in the Resistance.

Quite apart from the fact that “Socialisme et liberté” was very short-lived and that its activities were reduced to intellectual discussions, Sartre’s resistance activities are still controversial. We have already cited one of Sartre’s most savage critics. According to Gilbert Joseph, Sartre and Beauvoir’s only concerns during the Occupation years were with their literary careers. Other specialists do not share this view. Far from it. So as not to get lost in the labyrinthine arguments, we will simply look at the debate over the play *Les Mouches* [‘The Flies’], which was staged in June 1943 at the Théâtre de la Cité (formerly the Théâtre Sarah-Bernhardt; it had been ‘Aryanised’ by the Germans).

According to Gilbert Joseph and most of those who saw the play, its ‘resistance’ content was either non-existent or invisible. Like all plays performed at this time, it had been carefully vetted by the German censors and, whilst most of the collaborationist press slated it, that was because it was a bad play and because Dullin directed it badly. There was nothing ideological or political about this fiasco. It was Sartre’s sleight of hand that transformed a theatrical flop into a source of political capital: the ‘collabos’ could not stand the play’s implicit critique of Vichy.

In her study of the reception of Sartre's plays, Ingrid Glaster rejects this interpretation and attempts to demonstrate that *Les Mouches* was indeed a play about the Resistance produced with whatever was at hand, or in other words a play which outwitted the censors.<sup>3</sup> Like Jean Paulhan, the author sees the play as 'an apologia for freedom in the context of an oppressive regime', and as a satire of Vichy's 'meaculpsism'. She cites Goebbels' Berlin-based newspaper *Das Reich*, which saw the entire play as 'an act of defiance' and recalls, conversely, Michel Leiris's favourable review of *Les Mouches* in *Les Lettres françaises*, which had been published clandestinely since September 1942.

What are we to make of the cloud of suspicion that hangs over Sartre's Resistance activities? Sartre obviously felt nothing but contempt for Petainism and nothing but hatred for Nazism. But he did not actually do very much: he published a few articles in the clandestine press, wrote two anti-conformist plays (when the second –*Huis clos* ['No Exit']—was performed in Paris in May 1944, it provoked the moral indignation of André Castelot in *La Gerbe*), joined the Comité national des écrivains (CNE, established by the Communist *résistant* Jacques Decours, together with Jean Paulhan; *Les Lettres françaises* was its journal). He was scarcely a hero of the Resistance, and not even a particularly active member of it.

The recent controversy over Sartre's attitude towards the Jewish question and about his 1941 acceptance of the post of a tenured Jewish teacher who had been dismissed give, at the very least, the impression that Sartre's attention was concentrated mainly on his own work.<sup>4</sup> In addition to his two plays, he produced his

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<sup>3</sup> Ingrid Galster, *Le Théâtre de Jean-Paul Sartre devant ses premiers critiques*, vol 1, Paris: L'Harmattan, 2001 (second edn). Cf the clarifications in the same author's, 'Réflexions due un paradoxe dans l'itinéraire de Jean-Paul Sartre', in A. Betz and s. Martens, eds., *Les Intellectuels at l'Occupation*, Paris: Autrement, 2004, pp. 151-169.

<sup>4</sup> Ingrid Galster, 'Que faisait Sartre pendant l'Occupation?', *L'Histoire* no 248, pp. 18-19. For more details see pp 77

philosophical magnum opus *L'Être et le néant* ['Being and Nothingness'], which he published in 1943 and wrote most of his roman-fleuve *Les Chemins de la liberté* ['Roads to Freedom'], whilst continuing to teach at the Lycée Condorcet. Compared with the philosophers Georges Canguilhem and Jean Cavallès (who was shot in 1944), who were authentic heroes of the Resistance, Sartre's contribution to the Resistance was, when all is said and done, very modest, even if he was 'on the right side'.

How, then, are we to understand the fame he enjoyed immediately after the Liberation, when he became the prototypical resistance writer? His by-line appeared in *Combat*, which was published openly as early as August 1944. On 30 August 1944, he wrote: 'We have finally taken the path that leads from painful docility to insurrection.' He made a much stronger intellectual impact with the article 'La République du silence', which was printed in the first issue of *Les Lettres françaises* to be published openly (September 1944).

These post-war articles received worldwide distribution, thanks first of all to the French exiles based in London and New York. They are an apologia for the vast majority of French people who suffered under the Occupation. Sartre explains the ambiguity of their attitude –which Philippe Burin described as one of 'accommodation'—'Can you understand me if I say both that it [the horror of the Occupation] was intolerable and that we accommodated ourselves to it very well?'<sup>5</sup> A translation of 'La République du silence' was published in December 1944 in the American journal *The Atlantic Monthly*, which had no qualms about turning its author into a *maquis* fighter: 'Jean-Paul Sartre is a French poet and dramatist who

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<sup>5</sup> Cf Susan Suleiman's comments in her 'Choisir son passé; Sartre mémorialiste de la France occupée' in Ingrid Glaster, ed., *La Naissance du phénomène Sartre*, Paris: Le Seuil. 2001. pp. 226-27

distinguished himself as one of the FFI's (French Forces of the Interior) military leaders during the long years of the German Occupation.'

In January 1945, Sartre was sent to the United States by *Le Figaro*. He was greeted as a Resistance hero. Anxious to display his solidarity with the French Resistance, the writer did nothing to deny the claim. In July 1945, when *Vogue* published his article on 'New Writing in France', in which he praised Camus, the American editor added a long note reading: 'Jean-Paul Sartre looks like the men on the barricades in photographs of the Paris insurrection.' 'This man of the Resistance' was 'certainly the most widely admired of the young men who are shaping the direction of contemporary French literature.'<sup>6</sup>

The American academic Susan Suleiman argues that, by allowing himself to be transformed into a Resistance hero, Sartre made a choice that represented a life-long commitment. For his part, John Gerassi writes: 'From 1945 on, Sartre did more than any other intellectual to denounce injustice and to support the wretched of the earth.'<sup>7</sup> Susan Suleiman explains this attitude by citing an illuminating phrase from *L'Être et le néant* as an epigraph that illustrates her point: 'We therefore choose our past in the light of certain ends, but it then becomes a necessary past and it devours us.' The founding of *Les Temps modernes* is a startling confirmation of this choice. The first issue appeared in October 1945.

### Commitment and Neutralism

Sartre's intention was to assert that the writer had a responsibility to unveil the world and had to want to change it. The journal's first editorial committee included, in

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 235.



addition to Sartre, Raymond Aron, Simone de Beauvoir, Michel Leiris, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Albert Ollivier and Jean Paulhan. Malraux declined the offer and Camus, who was also approached, was too busy with *Combat*.

The 'Présentation des temps modernes' outlined the theory of 'committed literature' that would be discussed in greater detail in the later articles making up the essay *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* ['What Is Literature?'] Sartre puts forward an ethics of responsibility: the writer's every word has a meaning. Every word has its repercussions, and so does every silence: 'We regret Balzac's indifference to the *journées* of 1848, and the fearful Flaubert's failure to understand the Commune; we regret it *for their sake*: there was something there that they missed for ever. We do not want to miss anything of our times ...'

The writer has a responsibility not only to bear witness, but 'to help to bring about certain changes in the society around us.' Sartre does not mean that the writer should fight for a specific political and social programme, but that he should take a position on events as and when they occur, without concerning himself with any particular political party. Distrustful of both the individualist thesis and the collectivist antithesis, he wishes to devote his energies to 'defending the autonomy and rights of the individual.' He wants his journal to be 'a research organ': a 'general line' will emerge eventually. In *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*, which is a manifesto against 'art for art's sake', Sartre takes an even more radical position. 'The "committed" writer knows that words are action; he knows that unveiling the world means changing it, and that the only way to unveil it is to plan to change it ... He knows that words ... are "loaded pistols".'

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<sup>7</sup> John Gerassi, *Jean-Paul Sartre: Hated Conscience of his Century*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989, p. 187.

The writers of the  *NRF* 's (Nouvelle Revue Française) glory days - the Gides, the Martin du Gard and the apologists for 'pure literature'- had good reason to be disturbed by these warning shots. The author of  *Les Thibault* , who was not an unworldly man, seems to have been shattered: 'Sartre's manifesto was the final blow ... The impression that a tombstone –heavy, cold, implacable and definitive—has fallen on everything we love about this world, everything that gave us a few reasons to go on living and desiring. We've been swept away, together with the whole of the past, by this hot-headed present as it hurls itself into the assault... I don't doubt that Sartre is already a spokesman for the rising generations, and it is futile to think that we will still find sympathetic readers in their ranks.'<sup>8</sup>

Sartre's rise to power did indeed seem irresistible. France was discovering the extent and diversity of his talents. He was a philosopher ( *L'Être et le néant* ), a novelist ( *La Nausée* ,  *L'Age de raison*  ['The Age of Reason'],  *Le Sursis*  ['The Reprieve'], a dramatist ( *Les Mouches* ,  *Huis clos* ,  *Morts sans sépultures*  ['Men without shadows'],  *La Putain respectueuse*  ['The Respectful Prostitute']), a political essayist ( *L'Existentialisme est un humanisme* ,  *Réflexions sur la question juive*  ['Existentialism is a Humanism', 'Anti-Semite and Jew']) and a literary theorist ( *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* ,  *Baudelaire* ). In 1946, Sartre was the dominant figure in French literature. He came under attack from all sides, with Communists, Catholics and conservatives all reviling him, but even the polemics added to his glory. One of his critics had to concede that 'Sartrism is the height of fashion.'

Rejected by both the great churches of the day –the nascent Catholic church and the triumphant Communist church—Sartre's discourse became, for many of these who were emerging from Vichy's moral order, the discourse of a rediscovered

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<sup>8</sup> Roger Martin du Gard,  *Journal III* , Paris: Gallimard, 1993, p. 771.

freedom. The fashion for 'existentialism' transformed Saint-Germain-des-Près, its literary cafes and its jazz cellars, into a new Olympus. Magazines made stars of Sartre and Beauvoir, whom they called *la grande Sartreuse*. It was thanks to this incomparable prestige, this combination of fascination and loathing, that Sartre was able to have such influence as a committed writer.

The final section of *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* spells out the political goals of *Les Temps modernes*. According to 'Situation de l'écrivain en 1947, 'The historical situation urges us to join the proletariat in building a classless society.' At the same time, 'Becoming one of Communist Party's watchdogs is out of the question.' Sartre is quite clear about what is to be done: 'In our writings, we must campaign for the freedom of the individual and for the socialist revolution.' The slogan 'Socialism and Freedom', which still meant something, led Sartre and his comrades to look for a third way that rejected both capitalism and Stalinism. But when Sartre was forced to choose between the two, or between the US and the USSR, he tended to side with the Soviets. Raymond Aron and Albert Ollivier, who made the opposite choice, left *Les Temps modernes* in June 1946.

In December of that year, Sartre's journal adopted a violent position against France's war in Indochina. In 1947, Sartre attacked Gaullism and the RPF (Gaullist party), which he regarded as a fascist movement. The following year, the cold war led *Les Temps modernes* to denounce American imperialism, whilst still claiming to be neutral and pacifist. Together with Merleau-Ponty, who was the journal's real political brain, Sartre and other intellectuals, and especially the editors of Mounier's rival journal *Esprit*, published a joint manifesto calling for a socialist and neutral Europe.

Although he was a revolutionary without a revolution, to use a phrase originally applied to André Breton and the surrealists, Sartre still looked dangerous to the leadership of the PCF (French Communist Party) because he enjoyed international prestige and was able to influence communist intellectuals. His former pupil Kanapa waged a campaign against him, and it reached a paroxysm when Sartre's *Les Mains sales* [known in English both as 'Crime Passionnel' and 'Dirty Hands'] opened in 1948; it was interpreted as an anti-communist play.

Could this position be expressed in political terms? Sartre was briefly convinced that it could when David Rousset invited him to join the Rassemblement Démocratique Révolutionnaire, which he had founded in 1948. The RDR's manifesto asserted that: 'Given that we must choose between the rotteness of capitalist democracy, the weaknesses and flaws of a certain social democracy and the limitations of the Stalinist form of communism, we believe that a union of free men who are for revolutionary democracy is capable of breathing new life into the principles of freedom and human dignity by relating them to the struggle for the social revolution.' Journalists from *Le Franc-Tireur* and some of the *Esprit* team joined Sartre and Rousset; *Le Monde* and *Combat* devoted sympathetic articles to them. The RDR's positions were publicised by press conferences, meetings and publications. The RDR had its own paper, *La Gauche*, and in its first issue Sartre asserted that 'The first goal is to link revolutionary demands to the idea of freedom.'

Although some of its demonstrations were public successes, the RDR did not last long, and never had enough members to become a mass movement. The Communist Party laid into Sartre, Rousset and their *rassemblement* tooth and nail, and *L'Humanité* described the RDR as 'a clique of intellectuals whose flashy generalities

and slogans cannot conceal their deliberate acceptance of the capitalist regime.’<sup>9</sup>

Suspecting that David Rousset and others were about to adopt a pro-American stance, Sartre resigned from the RDR in October 1949.

It was at this point that he began to sense that becoming closer to the communist might be a solution, if not the only political solution. The controversy over the Soviet camp system finally led to a break between Sartre and Rousset, who was campaigning against Stalin’s camps.

Sartre did not deny that the Gulag existed, but he refused to use it as a stick to beat the USSR with. ‘Whatever the nature of today’s Soviet society’, we read in the editorial in the January 1950 issue of *Les Temps modernes*, ‘the Soviet Union is, by and large, and given the balance of power, on the side of those who are struggling against the forms of exploitation we are so familiar with. The fact that Russian communism is decadent does not mean that the class struggle is a myth, that “free enterprise” is either possible or desirable, or, more generally, that the Marxist critique is dated.’ It would be a mistake to conclude that we should be indulgent towards Soviet communism, but in no case can we ‘side with its enemies’.

#### Fellow traveller

The Korean War, which began on 26 June 1950, further brought Sartre even closer to the Party. The North Korean army’s aggression against South Korea led Merleau-Ponty to reject all compromises with the PCF completely but, now that the cold war had turned hot, Sartre felt that it was necessary to take sides, and impossible to go on sitting on the fence. Merleau-Ponty left. What line *Les Temps modernes* was taking

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<sup>9</sup> Cited, Jean-Michel Bernier, *Les Existentialistes et la politique*, Paris, Gallimard, 1966, p. 71

was unclear. Sartre moved much closer to the Communists when, in 1950, second engine-room artificer Henri Martin was arrested and charged with sabotaging a warship during a protest against the war in Indochina. Martin was eventually found guilty, not of involvement in sabotage, but of demoralising the armed forces. The huge campaign calling for him to be freed launched by the Communist Party led to a general mobilisation of intellectuals and artists. Henri Martin was released in 1953, the year in which Sartre published *L’Affaire Henri Martin*, which is a collection of articles supporting the accused. In the meantime, Sartre had become a real fellow traveller.

The catalyst was the demonstration organised by the PCF to protest at the appointment of General Ridgeway, who had served in Korea, as head of SHAPE (Strategic headquarters Allied Powers in Europe). Although banned, the demonstration went ahead on 28 May 1952 and was violently repressed by the police. Two people were killed. Sartre was in Rome but returned immediately to Paris on hearing the news. ‘To use religious language,’ he wrote, ‘it was a conversion.’ He then launched into a lengthy explanation entitled ‘Les Communistes et la paix’ [‘The communists and peace’]. The first part appeared in *Les Temps modernes* in July 1952, followed by parts two and three in October 1952 and April 1954.

The text is like a torrent of boiling cascades. Full of savage attacks and alternating between austere analysis and outbursts of rage, it is a lengthy proof of the syllogism: the proletariat is the only historical agent that can bring about the end of exploitation and give birth to a new society; the working class does not exist in itself and becomes the proletariat thanks to and through the Communist Party; we therefore cannot make any distinction between the Communist Party and the proletariat, and adopting its policy is the only way forward: ‘How can you believe both that the

proletariat has a historical mission and that the Communist Party has betrayed it, when you can see that one votes for the other:’

Having joined the peace movement, Sartre went to Vienna in November 1952 to attend the World Peace Congress, which was a front organisation under Soviet control. At the 1948 meeting of the same Congress, Andrei Fadeev had described Sartre as ‘a hyena with a typewriter’. Sartre did not care; it was time for a marriage of convenience with the Soviets.

Sartre’s presence gave the Congress a prestige its organisers had not expected. In the Austrian capital, his alliance with the Communists took on a new form; he refused to allow the planned production of *Les Mains sales* to go ahead. It was not so much what he said on the platform that made the congress such a milestone as the fact that he was present: the Communists could rejoice at having won the most famous writer in the world over to their cause.

When he rallied to Soviet Communism, Sartre triggered a series of breaks. The first was between Sartre and Camus. The two men quarrelled before Sartre’s ‘conversion’, but the question of communism was always the underlying issue. Camus was from a working class background, had been a communist, had no bourgeois guilt complex and did not labour under the illusion that humanity’s salvation lay with the proletariat. He was more interested in moral imperatives than theories of commitment. Francis Jeanson’s critique of Camus’s essay *L’Homme révolté* [‘The Rebel’] in *Les Temps modernes* led to polemic exchanges between Camus and Sartre. Personal issues aside, the question of communism was raised and, in the name of efficacy, Sartre criticised Camus for being moralistic and for having become ‘The Republic of Beautiful Souls’ public prosecutor’ (August 1952).

There was also a break with Claude Lefort who, together with Castoriadis, had founded the Socialism ou barbarie group. He could not tolerate Sartre's support for the Party's Leninist thesis that 'The masses now need the Party' (April 1953). There was a break with René Etiemble, an anti-racist campaigner who was particularly critical of Sartre's failure to condemn Stalin's anti-semitism during the so-called 'doctors' plot', and who expressed his disagreement in these terms: 'Rather than go on living under a dictatorship, I choose to die in order to support any regime that guarantees me *habeas corpus* and *habeas mentem*, because life is unthinkable without those guarantees' (*Arts*, 24 July 1953).

The most painful, and perhaps the most serious, break was with Merleau-Ponty. Having been elected to the Collège de France, Merleau-Ponty said his farewells to *Les Temps modernes*. It could have been an amicable parting, but Merleau chose to undertake an in-depth examination of his relationship with Marxism in *Les Aventures de la dialectique*, which was published in 1955. Half the book is taken up by the fifth chapter on 'Sartre and Ultra-Bolchevism.' Merleau-Ponty denounces Sartre's position as untenable: he was declaring that Communism was infallible but refused to join the party. It was Beauvoir who replied to Merleau-Ponty, accusing him of borrowing arguments from the right-wing paper *L'Aurore* and of 'taking the side of the bourgeoisie.'

Like his new collaborators Marcel Péju and Claude Lanzmann, Sartre was to be an almost totally loyal fellow traveller for four years (1952-1956). The journal did publish a few side swipes at Kanapa and at the Soviet antisemitism that emerged during the Slansky trial in Prague in 1952, but for four years Sartre and *Les Temps modernes* were such zealous allies that they were PCF's darlings. When he returned



from a trip to the USSR in 1954, Sartre gave *Libération*, a daily close to the PCF, a series of six articles singing the praises of the Soviet regime.

There was also other ways of serving the Communist cause, including writing plays. Sartre had given up writing novels years ago, but he still wrote for the stage. *Le Diable et le bon dieu* ['Lucifer and The Lord'], which was staged in 1951, can be interpreted as a lesson in political realism: as Goetz (played by Pierre Brasseur) says in his last tirade: 'There is a war to be fought, and I will fight it.' In 1955 Sartre lambasted the abjection of the anticommunist press in *Nekrassov*. This was a fairly crude farce staged at the Théâtre Antoine by Jean Meyer, but Sartre was preaching to the converted. 'So I'm destroying the hopes of the poor? So what?' asks the cynical Georges (Michel Vitold). 'Every man for himself. They just have to stand up for themselves. So I'm slandering the USSR, am I? I'm doing it on purpose: I want to destroy communism in the West.'

Did *Les Temps modernes* have anything more to offer than protests? The answer was clear, and was quite in keeping with what the PCF wanted: a reunited left. But complicity with the Communist Party ceased to be a necessity when Soviet tanks crushed the Hungarian insurrection in the autumn of 1956. In his attack on Sartre, Merleau-Ponty had demonstrated that, in Sartre's view, the proletariat was nothing if it did not stick to the party line. 'It immediately comes into existence when it obeys, and ceases to exist when it disobeys.' The Hungarian insurrection of October-November 1956 allowed Sartre to discover a very real proletariat that existed outside the party: the old equation 'communist-party = working class' was shattered into pieces.

The official version put out by the communists was that the Soviets had put down an attempted fascist counter-revolution. This time, Sartre rejected the lie.

Having signed a petition drawn up by left-wing intellectuals and dissenting communists, he gave a long interview to *L'Express* on 9 November. Unlike *L'Express*, he did not support Mendès-France, but this was a theatrical way of distancing himself from the Party. The interview was followed by a triple number of *Les Temps modernes* and Sartre's interminable 'Le Fantôme de Staline' ['The Ghost of Stalin]: 'I tell you quite clearly that you will not longer fool us by blackmailing us with talk of fascism.'<sup>10</sup>

This was a decisive turning point and Sartre would never again be a fellow traveller. And yet it would be another ten years before he changed his favourable opinion of the USSR, which he visited on a number of occasions. His quest for a socialism that could not be divorced from freedom did, on the other hand, lead him to adopt positions that were clearly anti-PCF in 1968, when the Soviets crushed the 'Prague spring'. He saw this as further proof of the 'implacable and continue decline of Soviet socialism.'<sup>11</sup> This was a strategic change, but not a complete change of direction. Sartre's positions was always socialist, anti-bourgeois, anti-American, anti-capitalist and above all anti-imperialist.

### The Algerian War

Between 1956 and 1962, Sartre and his journal fought their most radical battle in support of the FLN (National Liberation Front) and the Algerian nationalist cause.

A special issue of *Les Temps modernes* devoted to 'The Left' and published as early as May 1955 ended with a call for a 'Popular front based on the PCF and the SFIO (Socialist Party)' that could implement a neutral foreign policy that rejected

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<sup>10</sup> In Jean-Paul Sartre, *Situations* VII, Paris: Gallimard, 1965, pp. 144-307.

both blocs, reform the country's economic structure, and free overseas people from 'an anachronistic colonialism.' But in March 1956, the Communists voted in the Assemblée nationale to grant Guy Mollet full powers in Algeria. For Sartre and his friends, the struggle for independence was now the first priority.

Denouncing the myth of 'French Algeria' and the realities of 'colonialism' ('Le Colonialisme est un système', ['Colonialism is a system'] March-April 1956), Sartre and his comrades committed themselves to the cause of Algerian independence and quickly declared themselves to be in solidarity with the FLN. In April 1957, *Esprit* published the first eye-witness account of the methods being used by the army in Algeria by a recalled soldier (Robert Bonnaud, 'La Paix de Nementchas'), shortly afterwards, *Les Temps modernes* published Georges Mattei's account.

Immediately after 13 May 1958, when the French were asked for their opinion of the constitutional plans for a Fifth Republic, Sartre attempted to unmask the ambiguities of Gaullism in *L'Express*: 'De Gaulle is not fascist; he is a constitutional monarch; but no one can vote for de Gaulle today: your "yes" would be addressed only to fascism.'

*Les Temps modernes*' discourse was uncompromisingly radical and made no concessions. As during his para-Stalinist phase, Sartre refused to supply his enemies with weapons; when it became known that it was the FLN that was responsible for the massacre at Melouza, *Les Temps modernes*, unlike other publications on the left, remained silent.

Sartre's extreme positions led him to distance himself from 'the respectful left', which could not follow its convictions through to the end, to support the *Manifeste de droit d'insoumission* (the so-called 'Manifeste des 121', which defended

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<sup>11</sup> 'Le Socialisme qui venait du froid', in *Situations IX*, Paris: Gallimard 1972, pp 227-76.

the right to refuse to serve in the army) in September 1960, and to declare his support for the networks supplying aid to the FLN during the Jeanson trial, which opened in the same month

Sartre was in Brazil, where he said that he wanted to be an anti-Malraux and to denounce General de Gaulle's Algerian policy, and sent a letter to the court that was trying the member of the support networks who 'carried suitcases' for the FLN. The letter was in fact written in Paris by his lieutenants Lansmann and Peju; after making his position clear in a telephone conversation, Sartre had given them *carte blanche*, and had expressed complete solidarity with Jeanson: 'If Jeanson had asked me to carry suitcases or to shelter Algerian militants, and if I could have done so without posing any threat to them, I would have done so without hesitation.'<sup>12</sup> This caused a scandal, and *L'Aurore* called the statement 'a bomb.' Despite the defiance and despite vehement protests from various organisations, De Gaulle refused to take legal action against Sartre; as he was to say again in different circumstance 'One does not put Voltaire in jail.'

Sartre's anticolonial resolve became even more pronounced when he wrote a preface for Frantz Fanon's *Les Damnés de la terre* and caused a new scandal. This was the most aggressive of all 'third worldist' manifestos (translated into seventeen languages, the preface helped to popularise the expression). 'When peasants pick up guns, the old myths fade, and the taboos are overthrown one by one: a fighter's weapon is his humanity. For in the initial stages of the revolt, it is necessary to kill: killing a European meaning killing two birds with one stone. It means killing an oppressor and one of the oppressed at the same time.'<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Reproduced, Simone de Beauvoir, *La Force des choses* p. 573.

<sup>13</sup> In *Situations V*, Paris: Gallimard, 1964, p. 183.

The philosopher, for his part, did not despair of producing the theoretical magnum opus that could reconcile the hopes of socialism and the imperative of freedom. He flung himself into writing the *Critique de la raison dialectique* [‘Critique of Dialectical Reason’], the first part of which appeared in 1960; it was never completed, and parts were published posthumously.

The positions and postures of Sartre, as expressed in his writings, continued for a long time to be those of rejection, revolt and intransigence. His rejection of the Nobel Prize in 1964 was a symbol. So too was the attitude he adopted in 1968. Although old, ill and not the man he used to be, he regained his youth in May.

The years of *gauchisme*

All commentators are agreed that America’s war in Vietnam was one of the underlying reasons for the emergence of the student movements that resulted in ‘68’ in the United States, Germany, Italy, Japan and France. Sartre was involved at every stage. In 1967, he chaired the self-appointed Russell Tribunal on American war crimes in Vietnam.

It is true that, at the time, Sartre had lost his influence. Existentialism and Marxism were no longer in fashion in France, where Lévi-Strauss, Foucault, Lacan and the linguists had made structuralism such a success. *Scientificity* was a greater imperative than *commitment*. Sartre, who was struggling to defend history against this new culture, was no longer popular with the younger generation. The explosion of May gave him his revenge. He did not inspire it, but he became one of its militant supporters, and helped to spread the rebellion on the speaker’s platform, in the press and even at the factory gate.

Once again, he went to extremes. In *Le Nouvel Observateur*, he lambasted his former ‘*petit camarade*’ Raymond Aron, who ‘has never protested and who in therefore, in my view, unworthy of being a teacher.’ He damned the communists who were ‘afraid of revolution’ and, like the *gauchistes*, denounced the elections as ‘a mug’s game’ [*pièges à cons*]. When Edgar Faure’s reforms were passed, he railed against ‘participation’: ‘phoney reforms’, and ‘mystification, pure and simple.’

What programme did he offer the students? He outlined it in an interview given to *Le Nouvel Observateur* on 17 March 1969. He warned them against ‘hanging themselves’ [*se pendre*] and ‘selling out’ [*se vendre*], and urged them to ‘unite’, to ‘conserve their negative power, wage a skirmishing war against the old men who governed them and to rally, as soon as they could, the majority of the workers, who are the real revolutionary force, and overthrow the le regime.’ At sixty-three, Sartre was still an angry young man.

These were the years of leftism: support for extremist slogans, solidarity with the Maoists of the Gauche prolétarienne, selling *La Cause du peuple* in the street after its editors had been arrested, sponsoring of the daily *Libération* and then becoming its editorial director, a visit to Baader (leader of the Red Army Fraction) and a denunciation of his conditions of imprisonment. Sartre even went so far as to justify the Palestinian terrorist attack on the Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics in 1972.

And yet, if Jean Paul-Sartre did have a sense of proportion, it was the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that brought it out. The author of *Réflexions sur la question juive* has defended the legitimacy of the Jewish state ever since it was founded. Despite the anti-Semitism of his Maoist friends, he never changed his opinion. Immediately after the six days war of 1967, *Les Temps modernes* published a huge special double issue: what the Israelis say; what the Palestinians say. Sartre was, as he liked to repeat, a

‘friend to both sides’. He reacted to General de Gaulle’s policy and introduction of an embargo by stating that ‘If you claim to be working towards a negotiated peace settlement by taking arms away from everyone, you are actually handing the state of Israel over to the Arabs.’ He rejected slogans that described Israel as a colonial conquest.

At the same time, he denounced the intolerable conditions in which the Arabs who had been driven out of their territory were living. He understood terrorism: ‘I do not criticise the Palestinians for doing things I approved of when the Algerian FLN did them, or for fighting as best they can.’ But nor could he criticise Israel for ‘responding, because we cannot ask them to let themselves be systematically killed without fighting back.’ So there was only one solution: a negotiated peace settlement.<sup>14</sup>

The refusal to see that there was any ‘total truth on either side’ in this conflict marks a departure from Sartre’s usual Manichaeism, and makes him more human. In 1974, he, Raymond Aron and Eugène Ionesco signed a joint statement criticising UNESCO because of its position on Israel. In 1976, the man who had refused to accept every honour, including the most famous of all –the Nobel—accepted an honorary degree from the University of Jerusalem.

In the last five years of his life, Sartre’s positions changed considerably. Now very weak and almost blind, he had long been opposed to the Soviet system and had expressed support for the East’s dissidents. In 1975, however, he once more displayed his usual pugnacity in an interview given to Michel Contat for *Le Nouvel Observateur*. He saw ‘no immediate hope’ for France and denounced the electoralism of the common programme of the left. The tide of leftism was on the ebb. The Gauche

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<sup>14</sup> *Le Fait public* 3, February 1969.

prolétarienne had dissolved itself. But, even at seventy, Sartre would not give up. When Merleau-Ponty died in 1961, Sartre said that it had been Merleau who had rescued him from being one of anarchism's retards. He was now proud to say that he was an 'anarchist' or 'libertarian socialist'. He had not changed his mind: either man really was 'screwed', or the revolution would make him truly human.

The ethical conundrum remained unsolved: wherever revolution had triumphed—the USSR, China, Cambodia, Cuba—the prisons were full and freedom had been abolished. Sartre knew it, and did not expect any help from China or anywhere else. He saw revolution as an absolute imperative because he was an unrepentant intellectual or, as his enemies put it, an incorrigible idealist. 'It's a gamble', he said. But unlike Pascal, 'I bet on man, not God.'

Over the following years, Sartre's image became blurred. In 1979, the newspapers reported that, together with Raymond Aron, he had been taken by André Glucksmann to the Elysée to plead the cause of the Vietnamese refugees –the boat people—who were fleeing the communist regime in Hanoi.

Sartre's last pronouncements are even more astonishing. I refer to the conversation with Benny Lévy (alias Pierre victor and former leader of La Gauche prolétarienne) published in *Le Nouvel Observateur*. Benny Lévy had rediscovered his Jewish faith and led Sartre on to unexpectedly religious ground. 'Corruption of the elderly,' one might say. Perhaps, but he remained true to his revolutionary ideals: 'We have to explain why today's world, which is ghastly, is no more than one moment in a long historical development, that hope has always been one of the dominant forces in revolutions and insurrections, and why it is that I still base my conception of the future on hope.'<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 24-30 March 1980.



Twenty years later, a magazine summed up Sartre's political record: 'A passion for being wrong.'<sup>16</sup> It's a terse formula and one that could be glossed endlessly, but it started a fashion: Sartre's reputation is that of a man who always got it wrong. And Jean Daniel's jibe had become a historical truth: 'Better to have been wrong with Sartre than to have been right with Raymond Aron.'

Despite the chorus of praise and the thirty thousand people who followed the coffin, Sartre's funeral was not a repetition of Victor Hugo's. It is tempting to compare the two men; born at the beginning of their respective centuries and dying in 1885 and 1980, they lived through most of them. Both men had, because the scope of their work and their international influence, the status of guides, and were at the forefront of social movements. That is where the similarities end. Hugo was already dead when his ideas—the Republic, an amnesty for the Communards, freedom proclaimed—when his ideas triumphed. Sartre died swimming against the tide. He had clung to his century and looked like a 'capital contemporary.'

When he died, the same expression was used to describe the prestigious spokesman for the great revolutionary illusion that haunted so many minds from 1945 onwards. There was nothing cheap or mediocre about this failure. Sartre's sense of politics may have been dubious, his vision of the world abstract, his extremist tendencies unthinking but, late in life, he took a deep interest in history which, while it was belated, became tireless. The moralist within him was always stronger than the political thinker, and that was both his weakness and his greatness.

Michel Winock is an editorial adviser to *L'Histoire*. His publications include *Le Siècle des intellectuels*, Paris: Le Seuil, 1977, and *La France et les Juifs de 1789 à*

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<sup>16</sup> *Le Point* 14 January 2000

*nos jours*, Paris: Le Seuil, 2004. Michel Winock is an Honorary Professor at the Institut d'études politiques de Paris.

Translated by David Macey

## Chronology

- 1905            born in Paris
- 1906            father dies
- 1929            agrégé de philosophie. Simone de Beauvoir becomes his partner
- 1938            *La Nausée*
- 1939            mobilised in Nancy, Brumath and Morsbronn; taken prisoner in 1940
- 1941            released from stalag. Found the 'Socialisme et liberté' resistance group. Appointed to teaching position Lycée Condorcet, Paris (*khâgne*).
- 1942            Joins CNE, contributes to the clandestine *Combat* and *Les Lettres françaises*
- 1943            *L'Être et le néant*, *Les Mouches*
- 1945            Refuses the Légion d'honneur. Given indefinite leave by Education nationale. Founds *Les Temps modernes*. Visits the United States twice.
- 1946            Sensational lecture: 'L'Existentialisme est un humanisme'. Publishes *Réflexions sur la question juive* and *Baudelaire*
- 1952            'Converts' to communism.
- 1954            First visit to USSR. Nine more visits between now and 1966
- 1956            Distances himself from the Soviet model
- 1960            Signs the Manifeste des 121 on the right not to serve in the war in Algeria
- 1964            *Les Mots* ['The Words']. Sartre refuses to accept the Nobel prize
- 1969            Death of his mother, Mme Mancy. Final break with the PCF.

- 1970-74 Editorial director of *La Cause du peuple*, *Tout!* and then *Libération*
- 1980 Dies in Paris. 30,000 people attend the funeral in Montparnasse cemetery.

## **Revue des revues de l'adpf, sélection de septembre 2005**

- Michel WINOCK: «Sartre s'est-il toujours trompé?»  
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