

INTRODUCTION: CLAIMING THE CORPSE



Anyone proposing to write yet another book about Jean-Paul Sartre must do so with a certain sense of guilt. Given the huge number of books and articles that already exist, what justification can there be for adding to them? Moreover, any writer on Sartre lives with the melancholy awareness that Sartre himself insisted that he had never learnt anything from any of the books written about him.¹ Yet such is the richness and complexity of Sartre's work that there are still things that have not been said – as well, unfortunately, as some that have been said all too often, despite the fact that they are untrue.

One of Sartre's earliest political memories was of the Russian Revolution of 1917; he died just before the rise of *Solidarność* in Poland in 1980. His life thus encompassed the rise and fall of Eastern bloc Communism. After witnessing the early days of Hitler in power, he lived through the Popular Front, the German Occupation and the crisis years of France's disastrous colonial wars in Indo-China and Algeria, before participating in the rebirth of the left in 1968.

From a relatively unpolitical stance in the 1930s Sartre became increasingly involved in the politics of the left. He opposed fascism and colonialism, and aligned himself with the struggles of the oppressed at home and abroad. But after 1945 the political line-up became much more complicated. The hopes that the Liberation would usher in an age of libertarian socialism soon perished under the pressures of the emerging Cold War. For a generation the French Communist Party (PCF), with its dogmatic caricature of Marxism, its undemocratic practices and its slavish subordination to the political needs of its Moscow bosses, dominated the French left. And well beyond the ranks of the Communist Party the idea that the USSR represented 'socialism' on a world scale was prevalent.

If Sartre always distrusted Stalinism he was sometimes driven to ally himself with it, though only for one brief period did the alliance have any

real substance. Though he took a keen interest in the independent left (often influenced, to a greater or lesser extent, by ideas derived from Leon Trotsky), he remained unwilling to throw in his lot with it. Yet for a new political generation coming to maturity in the 1960s Sartre was a vital influence; his stress on individual responsibility, and his outspoken denunciation of imperialism and oppression, unmodified by the tactical considerations that trammelled the PCF, made him an inspiration for those who wanted to reinvent a revolutionary socialist politics.

From the 1940s onwards Sartre always had his critics from the right – and the left – who accused him of nourishing dangerous illusions about the nature of the USSR and other Stalinist regimes. This was a major theme in his notorious 1952 quarrel with Camus and above all in the way that that quarrel was publicly perceived. But after Sartre's death in 1980, and even more since the alleged 'death of communism' in 1989, the critical chorus grew ever stronger. Many, it seemed, would be only too glad to let Sartre's corpse fester under the ruins of the Berlin Wall. For those who made a simple equation between Marxism and Stalinism, the end of the USSR meant an end to the whole socialist project.² Sartre's basic message – that the world can be changed; that we are free to change it; and that if we fail to do so we bear the responsibility – could now only be an embarrassing anachronism liable to give the wrong ideas to the younger generation. Thus Norman Podhoretz has insisted that one cannot reject Stalinist Communism without also repudiating what he calls 'the utopian dreams of a transformed and redeemed world'.³ Hunger, poverty and economic crisis, it appears, are to be always with us. As for former Maoist Bernard-Henri Lévy, his recent study of Sartre, while not unsympathetic, is based on total rejection of communism, not merely in its Stalinist manifestation, but in its very essence – 'the revolutionary ideal is a criminal and barbarous ideal'.⁴

Sartre undoubtedly made some colossal misjudgements about the nature of Stalinism, some of which will be analysed below. But a generalised reputation for being 'soft on Stalinism' has meant that a number of myths have grown up around Sartre, which are repeated from one historian or journalist to the next without reference to factual evidence, until they have been reiterated so often that it seems eccentric to question them.

Thus in his obituary of Sartre, George Steiner declared that Sartre was 'damnable wrong – on the Soviet camps for example'.⁵ Now it is possible to query Sartre's analysis of the role of labour camps in Russian society, or his decisions on political alliances in opposing them. But contrary to the pervasive myth, there can be no doubt whatsoever that he publicly condemned the camps. Tony Judt, in a study of Sartre and other French intellectuals, referred to Sartre's 'famous warning "Il ne faut pas désespérer Billancourt"'⁶ [we must not make (the workers of the Renault car factory at) Billancourt despair]. The warning was apparently so famous that Judt felt no need to give any source for it. In fact Sartre said no such thing, but no matter. It has been repeated so often that everybody knows he said it,

just as everybody knows that Voltaire defended free speech for fascists when he – apocryphally – said: ‘I disagree with what you say but I shall defend to the death your right to say it’.⁷

Many of Sartre’s sternest critics in recent years have come from the ranks of those who once shared his alleged illusions. Michel-Antoine Burnier, who in 1966 published a pioneering account⁸ of the politics of Sartre and *Les Temps modernes*, followed it in 1982 with a savage satire written in the first person in which Sartre confessed his pro-Communism, *Le Testament de Sartre*.⁹ Former Maoists Claudie and Jacques Broyelle vilified Sartre at the expense of his old friend and antagonist Camus.¹⁰ They did not have a difficult job. Sartre wrote an astounding quantity of material, published and unpublished; he made many rash and imprudent claims; and he frequently contradicted himself. It is not difficult to construct an indictment against him. To give a full and fair account of his merits as well as his defects is a rather more demanding task.

History has not been kind to the apologists of Stalinism, but an examination of the evidence is not particularly to the credit of the professional cold warriors of anti-Communism either. Their mission was always to use legitimate criticism of Stalinism to weaken socialism and working-class organisation. Their model of Stalinism as a monolithic society which could not achieve change from within was actually disproved by the whole process of popular revolt that helped to produce the collapse of Stalinism (and by the precursors of that revolt in East Germany 1953, Hungary 1956, Czechoslovakia 1968 and Poland 1980). Their defence of Western society was often naive in the extreme; for one example among many it is worth citing Karl Popper’s claims from the 1950s that ‘the problem of mass-unemployment has largely been solved’ and that ‘racial discrimination has diminished to an extent surpassing the hopes of the most hopeful’.¹¹

Moreover, Sartre’s critics fail to explain why, if he was in fact such an abject and sycophantic admirer of Stalinism, the PCF felt the need to launch such violent denunciations of him, notably those by such leading party intellectuals as Garaudy, Lefebvre and Kanapa in the period after the Liberation.

Indeed, as Sartre himself pointed out in 1948 in a preface to the American translation of *La Putain respectueuse*, the fact that he was being maligned by both sides in the emergent Cold War could only confirm his sense that he was in the right:

It would be strange for me to be accused of anti-Americanism in New York at the very moment that *Pravda* in Moscow is energetically accusing me of being an agent of American propaganda. But if that were to happen, it would prove only one thing: either that I am very clumsy, or that I am on the right road.¹²

What follows is conceived of as a political defence of Sartre. Of course the very term ‘political’ raises problems. In 1979 Sartre’s long-term associ-

ate Jean Pouillon reported Sartre as saying: 'Politics? That doesn't interest me.'¹³ If politics is taken in its normal sense of ballot boxes and party manoeuvres in legislative assemblies, then Sartre was no doubt telling the truth. But he also told his young Maoist comrades in 1972 that 'everything is political, that is, calls into question society as a whole and leads to a challenge to it'.¹⁴

I have tried to bear in mind both the broad and narrow definitions of the 'political'. This book will confine itself to Sartre's political evolution and in particular to his relations to Stalinism and to the anti-Stalinist left. His literary and philosophical work – his major claims to distinction – will be touched on only inasmuch as they are relevant to that theme.

This study is not intended as an uncritical apologia for Sartre. Especially during his period of *rapprochement* with the PCF in the 1952–1956 period, Sartre did indeed make some quite unjustifiable statements. I have attempted to analyse the historical context, and to draw out the complexity of Sartre's position during this period, but an aim to understand does not imply justifying the unjustifiable. Sartre's own excuses for the period are particularly abject. In an interview in 1975 he admitted that after visiting the USSR he had 'lied' – but went on to add, firstly, that his secretary Jean Cau had finished off the incriminating article because he was ill (the previous year he had told de Beauvoir that Cau wrote the whole thing), and secondly that he was bound by obligations of courtesy: 'I thought that when you've been invited by people, you can't throw shit over them as soon as you get home.'¹⁵ Whatever the exact circumstances, Sartre had authorised the publication of the appallingly pro-Stalinist articles (including the absurd claim that there was total freedom of criticism in the USSR) under his name, and they were his responsibility; the excuses fall neatly into the category of what Sartre himself described as 'bad faith'.¹⁶

There were great weaknesses in Sartre's political stance. All too often he made choices in terms of the short-term alternatives available, and ended up siding with the big battalions of the established left rather than looking to the longer-term potential in the situation, though to his credit he did so primarily out of a belief that without the mass of the working class nothing could be achieved. But the balance sheet of his political commitments, from 1941 to 1968 and after, is very much positive. In insisting that a radical alternative to the status quo was possible, and in stressing the necessity for practical deeds, Sartre stood for a model of political action far superior to the scepticism and passivity of the postmodernists who succeeded him in popular fashion. For that alone Sartre deserves to be read and reread.

This still leaves open the question of his many tactical judgements and misjudgements. In general the argument hinges on the question of whether there was in fact an alternative. For Sartre's liberal and pro-Western critics, Marxism and indeed any kind of revolutionary socialism was identical with Stalinism; hence in order to renounce the evils of Stalinism Sartre would have had to reject the whole revolutionary tradition.

Thus Tony Judt chose a particularly tasteless metaphor with which to rubbish the anti-Stalinist left in France:

Like a battered wife, the non-Communist intelligentsia of the Left kept returning to its tormentor, assuring the police force of its conscience that 'he meant well', that he 'has reasons'. And that, in any case, 'I love him'. And like a violent husband, Communism continued to benefit from the faith its victims placed in their initial infatuation.¹⁷

That Judt had not studied the French anti-Stalinist left very carefully is shown by the fact that the names Colette Audry, Daniel Guérin, Maurice Nadeau, Pierre Naville and Alfred Rosmer are all absent from the index to his book.

In fact, as will be shown in what follows, there was a lively and vigorous anti-Stalinist left in France throughout the period of Sartre's adult life. The main components of this left can be listed as follows:

1. The organisations of 'orthodox' Trotskyism. While these were always very small, they occasionally had some impact on the course of events, notably in the Renault strike of 1947. The virulence of the Communist Party's attacks on 'Trotskyism' shows that they were not wholly insignificant.
2. Dissident Trotskyists, especially the grouping known as *Socialisme ou barbarie*. Although very small in numbers this tendency exercised an important influence on some of the leaders of the student movement in 1968, especially Daniel Cohn-Bendit, as well as on the Situationist Guy Debord. Some of its members – notably J.-F. Lyotard – were later to be influential in postmodernist circles.
3. Anarchists and syndicalists, in particular the survivors of revolutionary syndicalism, grouped round the journal *La Révolution prolétarienne*, including such veterans of the early Communist movement as Alfred Rosmer and Pierre Monatte. Albert Camus retained links with this current, while not sharing all their views.
4. The left of the Socialist Party. In the 1930s this was constituted by the *gauche révolutionnaire*, led by Marceau Pivert, and including such activists as Daniel Guérin and Colette Audry; later its members formed the *Parti socialiste ouvrier et paysan*. A far left of sorts survived in the postwar SFIO (Section française de l'internationale ouvrière) especially among the youth, though many were expelled or resigned with the rightward move of the party in the late 1940s.
5. Those surrealists who did not follow Aragon into Stalinism, notably André Breton, Benjamin Péret and Michel Leiris.
6. The independent left press. In the few years after the Liberation the papers *Combat* (edited by Camus and Bourdet, with its slogan 'From the Resistance to the Revolution') and Altman's *Franc-Tireur* had a combined print run higher than that of the Communist *L'Humanité*.¹⁸

In the 1950s the weekly *France-Observateur* appealed to a similar audience, as to some extent did also *L'Express*, at least on the Algerian question.

7. The *nouvelle gauche* of the 1950s and its successor, the *Parti socialiste unifié* (PSU), founded in 1960.
8. A number of individuals who had emerged from the Trotskyist movement – Pierre Naville, Maurice Nadeau, Gérard Rosenthal, David Rousset – many of whom remained faithful to their revolutionary principles.

These groupings did not constitute a mass movement, but they were not wholly insignificant in French political and intellectual life. Of course, they did not form a homogeneous current, and they were often sharply divided among themselves. Individuals developed radically – David Rousset from Trotskyism to Gaullism, Daniel Guérin from *pivertisme* to anarchism. Yet it is possible to establish that there was a distinct grouping of the French left which at one and the same time was strongly and openly critical of the various Stalinist regimes but supported working-class struggles at home and opposed French imperialism, notably in Indo-China and Algeria; this left advocated a model of socialism based on direct democracy utterly different from the authoritarian state power of Stalinism.

Yet there is not, to the best of my knowledge, any systematic study of Sartre's relations with this current. To a very considerable extent the blame for that must lie with Sartre himself, who in his last years repeatedly justified his previous positions by the claim that before 1968 there had been nothing to the left of the Communist Party:

Have you ever wondered why people who were *gauchistes* [supporters of the far left] in the PCF and who were expelled for *gauchiste* positions were later to be found to the right of the PCF, in the Socialist Party or worse? Because there was *nothing* to the left of the PCF.¹⁹

The Communists have always maintained – and it was true until now [1968] – that revolutionary movements which claimed to be located to the left of the PCF contributed to dividing the working class and always ended up by being 'objectively' further to the right than it was.²⁰

Yesterday there was no *gauchisme*. To the left of the Communist Party there was nothing. In 1936, in 1940–1941, there was only one solution, which was to take the side of the Communist Party.²¹

As the following account will show, these claims by Sartre are quite simply false. There was an independent anti-Stalinist left throughout the period from the early 1930s to 1968, and Sartre was well aware of it. He debated with it, cooperated politically with it on occasion, and encouraged its members to contribute to *Les Temps modernes*.

In a 1974 discussion with Simone de Beauvoir Sartre made a partial self-criticism: 'There were, to the left of the Communists, groups who challenged official Communism, and who were sometimes right on a mass of questions; I did nothing to find out more about them. Until 1966 I ignored everything to the left of the Communist Party.'²²

Again, unless Sartre was asleep when he wrote some of his most important polemics, this is simply untrue. Sartre was well aware of the positions of the anti-Stalinist left, and, as I hope to show, much more influenced by them than he was willing to admit.

There was, however, an important factor which led Sartre to feel closer to the big battalions of the PCF, despite his distrust of their politics, than to small groups like *Socialisme ou barbarie*. The choice of a small revolutionary group is always the choice of the future against the present. Such groups were far too small to have any direct impact on the course of events. Of course individual far left militants could lead a strike in a particular workplace, but the group as such could have no impact on the balance of forces in French society as a whole. The wager (rather like Pascal's wager on a future life) was that at some point in the future the correct anti-Stalinist politics would attract enough workers to challenge and replace the PCF.

For Trotsky and his generation there was what can be called the Zimmerwald syndrome. In 1915, at the time of the first anti-war conference in Switzerland, the internationalist left could be seated in four stage-coaches, but within five years it had become a worldwide movement of mass parties. Trotsky clearly believed this would happen again with the Second World War – hence his preoccupation with infinitesimal sects, because he believed that within a few years they would attract millions of workers. We have the advantage of hindsight – it was not wholly implausible at the time. Within the Trotskyist tradition the syndrome survived – when one group of fifty denounced another group of thirty it was because of the hope that within the foreseeable future it would become half a million.

But Sartre was quite outside this tradition. For him to opt for a small revolutionary group would have meant opting for the more or less distant future at the cost of abandoning any possibility of affecting the present. But Sartre's philosophy insisted that alternatives were available in the present; he was impressed by the power of the working class, even when he distrusted those who claimed to be its political representatives. He thus found himself trapped in an uneasy triangle. He was repelled by the PCF, yet powerfully drawn to it; he was unable to throw in his lot with the anti-Stalinist left, yet equally unable to disregard the force of its arguments.

But with few exceptions²³ most of Sartre's commentators have taken his statements about the anti-Stalinist left at face value. Many commentaries on Sartre's Marxism simply ignore his exchanges with such anti-Stalinists as Pierre Naville or Daniel Guérin; if the latter do get a name check there seems to be no recognition that their Marxism was qualitatively different from that of the PCF. As a result many commentaries on Sartre's Marxism

in the *Critique de la raison dialectique* largely miss the point, since they never identify what was the 'Marxism' that Sartre was in dialogue with. Was it the Marxism of Marx or of Stalin? All too often Sartre's intellectual development and his move towards Marxism are seen as taking place within the confines of his own skull, rather than in the context of the prolonged crisis of French Stalinism, as its hegemony was shaken by the international crisis of 1956, and then destroyed by the revolt of 1968.

The following book will examine Sartre's relations with the anti-Stalinist left over the different phases of his development, giving particular importance to such individuals as Colette Audry, Maurice Nadeau, Pierre Naville, David Rousset, Claude Lefort and Daniel Guérin. In so doing I hope to rescue Sartre from those who would like to bury him. It also provides the opportunity to give an account of a number of important independent Marxist writers and activists whose intellectual contribution has all too often been ignored in accounts of the French left since the 1930s.

In an important recent study of George Orwell, John Newsinger has sought to rescue Orwell from the cooption of the Cold War anti-Communist right and to show that he remained a committed socialist.²⁴ In a sense, I hope to have accomplished a parallel task, by rescuing Sartre from those who would try to transform him into a mere fellow traveller of Stalinism.

The method of this book is quite simply to place Sartre's various political writings in context. Sartre himself stated that books were like dates or bananas, which should be eaten on the spot as soon as they are picked.²⁵ Those of us who were born too late cannot know what it was like to read Sartre straight from the news-stand – or to hear him lecture – in 1945. But by studying the context, discovering whom he was addressing and against whom he was arguing, we can avoid misunderstanding his meaning.

Like István Mészáros, I think 'it is Sartre's lifework as a whole that predominates, and not particular elements of it'.²⁶ Hence I have drawn particularly on Sartre's journalism and polemical writings rather than his 'major' philosophical or literary works. Sartre himself believed that the collection of essays, polemics, prefaces and interviews that make up the ten volumes of *Situations* would be more likely to survive than any other part of his work.²⁷

Yet there is a problem with *Situations*. Sartre's polemics are reproduced without any commentary or indication of the context in which they were written. 'Replies' to Camus, Naville or Lefort are printed without any indication of what is being replied to. Often the other half of the dialogue exists only in the original journal where it first appeared. Sartre's 1952 debate with Camus has been endlessly reported, summarised and analysed, yet to the best of my knowledge the original review of *L'Homme révolté* by Francis Jeanson which sparked the quarrel has never been reprinted since it first appeared in *Les Temps modernes*.²⁸

Though not always wholly reliable, Simone de Beauvoir's various volumes of autobiography were an invaluable aid to reinserting Sartre's writings in their historical and polemical context. But de Beauvoir gave no

precise references, and her account often reflected her own prejudices, not always identical with Sartre's. It was the publication of Contat and Rybalka's *Les Écrits de Sartre* which first made possible the recreation of the living context of Sartre's work.

In this book I have tried, by identifying Sartre's opponents and consulting debates in the contemporary press, to reestablish Sartre's debate with the anti-Stalinist left, a debate all too often suppressed or ignored. If it encourages some readers to question the glib accusations hawked by Judt, the Broyelles and their like, it will serve its purpose.

Notes

1. *Sit X*, p. 188.
2. This position is not confined to the political right. Even some of those who remain very much on the radical left argue that since 1989 Marxism has become obsolete, and offer their allegiance to something called 'post-Marxism'.
3. N. Podhoretz, *The Bloody Crossroads*, New York, 1986, p. 28.
4. B.-H. Lévy, *Le Siècle de Sartre*, Paris, 2000, p. 477. Lévy even criticises Sartre for arguing in 1980 that the USSR was not a fascist country (p. 444) – something which even the most rigorous anti-Stalinist with an elementary respect for the meaning of words would do.
5. *Sunday Times*, 20 April 1980.
6. T. Judt, *Past Imperfect*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1992, p. 211.
7. See I.H. Birchall, 'Voltaire and Collective Action', *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, Vol. XIII, No. 1 (Spring 1990), p. 26.
8. M.-A. Burnier, *Les Existentialistes et la politique*, Paris, 1966.
9. M.-A. Burnier, *Le Testament de Sartre*, Paris, 1982. In 2000 Burnier published an autobiographical account of his own relations with Sartre, *L'Adieu à Sartre*, (Paris, 2000), showing how idolisation gave way to disillusion.. It is a more balanced assessment, and, like Bernard-Henri Lévy's book, may be symptomatic of the fact that the worst period of Sartre-baiting is now over.
10. C. and J. Broyelle, *Les Illusions retrouvées*, Paris, 1982.
11. Lecture at Bristol University, 12 October 1956, in K. Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations*, London, 1972, pp. 370–71.
12. *TDS*, p. 244.
13. J. Pouillon, 'Sartre et la politique', *Études sartriennes* II–III (1986), pp. 121–28.
14. *Raison*, p. 27.
15. *Sit X*, p. 220; *Adieux*, p. 462. The articles in question appeared in *Libération* 15–20 July 1954.
16. It is interesting to note that Albert Camus, whose supposed total honesty is frequently contrasted to Sartre, made a very similar excuse after his visit to the U.S.A. in 1946: 'I don't intend, like Sartre, to spit in the bowl after agreeing to eat the soup offered me.' (O. Todd, *Albert Camus*, Paris, 1996, p. 412). Whatever the issue, politeness is not a revolutionary virtue.
17. Judt, *Past Imperfect*, p. 158.
18. Comparative circulation figures:

	<i>L'Humanité</i>	<i>Franc-Tireur</i>	<i>Combat</i>
January 1945	326,000	182,000	185,000
April 1947	450,000	350,000	128,000

C. Bellanger et al., *Histoire générale de la presse française* Vol. IV, Paris, 1975, pp. 300, 357.

19. *Raison*, p. 41.
20. *Sit VIII*, p. 222.
21. J.-P. Sartre, B. Pingaud and D Mascolo, *Du Rôle de l'intellectuel dans le mouvement révolutionnaire*, Paris, 1971, p. 21.
22. *Adieux*, p. 504.
23. For a more critical account of Sartre's relations with Trotskyism see the obituary of Sartre by A. Krivine and D. Bensaid (*Le Matin*, April–May 1980, translated in *Telos* No. 44, Summer 1980, pp. 193–94).
24. J. Newsinger, *Orwell's Politics*, Basingstoke, 1999.
25. 'Ecrire pour son époque' (1946) in *C&R*, p. 674.
26. I. Mészáros, *The Work of Sartre*, Brighton, 1979, p. 14.
27. *Adieux*, p. 215.
28. This is not wholly true of the later volumes of *Situations*. Volume VIII contains a letter from D. I. Grossvogel and Sartre's correspondence with de Gaulle about the Russell Tribunal. (*Sit VIII*, pp. 20–24, 42–45). The inclusion of Kanapa's article 'Un "nouveau" révisionisme à l'usage des intellectuels' (A 'new' revisionism for the use of intellectuals) in *Sit VII*, pp. 94–98 was doubtless decided on because Kanapa's own text exposed his backbiting sectarianism more effectively than any critique could do.