Intellectuals and Communism

E. A. REES

Bradley F. Abrams, *The Struggle for the Soul of the Nation: Czech Culture and the Rise of Communism* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 362 pp., $87.00 (hb), $29.95 (pb), ISBN 074253023X.

Ian H. Birchall, *Sartre Against Stalinism* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2004), 242 pp., £14.95, ISBN 1571815422.

Lee Congdon, *Seeing Red. Hungarian Intellectuals in Exile and the Challenge of Communism* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2001) 223 pp., $40.00, ISBN 0875802834.

Françoise Mayer, *Les Tchèques et leur communisme: Mémoire et identités politiques* (Paris: Éditions de l'École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 2004), 304 pp., €24.00, ISBN 2713218152.

The attractions of communism to intellectuals, and the willingness of intellectuals to suspend their critical faculties in the name of the cause, was studied over thirty years ago by David Caute in his works *The Fellow Travellers: A Postscript to the Enlightenment* (1973) and *Le Communisme et les intellectuels français, 1941–1960* (1967). The issues raised by Caute retain their relevance, and even with the death of communism they remain of contention for a new generation of historians. With Ian Birchall's study of Jean-Paul Sartre we have an examination of a single intellectual, but placed in the wider political milieu in which he operated and his relationship with communist and non-communist intellectuals. Lee Congdon examines Hungarian émigré intellectuals, both communist and anti-communist, and their response to the Horthy regime and the Communist regime that followed. Bradley F. Abrams looks at the response of Czech intellectuals to the birth of communist power in Czechoslovakia after 1945, while Françoise Mayer provides a post mortem, examining the Czech people's reaction to the fall of communism after 1989.

The period covered by these studies encompasses the 1930s and the rise of fascism, the Second World War and the defeat of Nazism, and the 'liberation' of eastern Europe. The USSR emerged from this period as a major superpower, with high

Department of History and Civilisation, European University Institute (Florence), Villa Schifanoia, Via Boccaccio 121, 50016 San Domenico di Fiesole (FI), Italy; arfon.rees@iue.it.

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international prestige. But the establishment of the system of Stalinist rule in these countries, followed by the crises of 1953 in Poland and East Germany demonstrated its shaky foundations. After 1947 international politics were dominated by the Cold War, notably the Berlin blockade and the Korean War, and those tensions only eased with Stalin's death. Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin at the 20th party congress in 1956 precipitated new upheavals in Hungary and Poland, and ushered in a deep crisis of legitimation for Soviet communism. Against this dramatic backdrop these four studies trace how individuals responded to the profound choices of their times.

Congdon's book studies two generations of Hungarian émigré intellectuals: the first left the country after the First World War and settled in Germany and Austria, but after Hitler's advent to power left again for the Soviet Union and England; the second left after the Hungarian revolution of 1956. Their shared experience of totalitarianism forced them into an engagement with contemporary politics, although their views of Soviet communism differed. Some saw in communism an attempt to answer existentialist questions in a post-Christian age. Communism was both an answer to the loss of moral certainties as reflected in nihilism, but was itself a carrier of nihilistic thought.

Congdon depicts communism as a 'religiopolitical experiment', which satisfied the 'religious yearnings' of intellectuals without offending their self-image as rationalists and materialists. Nevertheless, embracing Soviet communism was an act of faith that required a willingness to turn a blind eye to uncomfortable truths. The infatuation with the Soviet Union extended to leading intellectuals of the period, reflecting a naive belief in socialist planning and progress, and a paternalistic attitude to social betterment at the hands of an enlightened party of revolutionaries.

In the 1930s Hungarian émigrés settled in Britain, some of whom had participated in, or been witnesses to, the Communist government of Bela Kun in 1918. These figures were closely involved in the debates in their adopted country. Congdon provides an interesting sketch of the radical intellectual milieu of Britain in the 1930s: the Workers' Educational Association, the Left Book Club, the campaigns against unemployment, anti-fascism and support for the Republican government in Spain.

One of the most significant of these figures was Michael Polanyi, who produced a scathing critique of Sidney and Beatrice Webb's *Soviet Communism: A New Civilization?* (1935). He also took issue with leading British intellectuals, such as John McMurray, who thought that a rapprochement of communism and Christianity was possible. Polanyi wrote extensively on science, and criticised J. D. Bernal and other advocates of Soviet-type planning, arguing for the independence of science, and for due weight to be given to pure and applied science. His book *Full Employment and Free Trade* (1945), influenced by J. M. Keynes, was directed against his own brother Karl, whose book, *The Great Transformation* (1944), provided a vindication of Soviet-type planning. Michael Polanyi saw Nazism and communism as forms of political nihilism, combining a dogmatic assertion of their 'truth' as perfectionist ideologies while openly declaring their amorality as regards to means.

Another interesting émigré figure was Aurel Kolnai, who in the 1920s wrote an early psychoanalytical study of communism in German. In 1926 he wrote of the distinction between Bolshevism and Italian Fascism:

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'In bolshevism there is a great deal more nobility and positive good – but also more ominous malice and unlimited arrogance – than in fascism. It stands at once closer to God and to Satan. For that reason it is despite many shared characteristics a far more diabolical force and a more immediate danger for those who seek God.' (p. 56)

After 1933 Kolnai saw Nazism as the greatest threat, warning of a 'war of paganism against Christianity'. He argued that Christianity, communism and democracy were brothers under the skin. In his book *The War Against the West* (1938) he highlighted, from a 'liberal Socialist' perspective, the struggle for democracy, Western civilisation and Christianity, while rejecting 'regressive revolution' (p. 54).

Undoubtedly the most famous and most influential of the Hungarian émigrés was Arthur Koestler, a card-carrying communist, who used Britain as a base, travelling to the USSR and also to Spain, financing himself by writing books on sexology. His *Spanish Testament* (1937) provided a fairly non-partisan account of the civil war, although he later admitted that he had glossed over atrocities committed by the Republicans. In the second part of the book – 'Dialogue with death' – he describes his life-changing experience of imprisonment in Seville. Another incarceration in a camp in France formed the basis of *Scum of the Earth* (1941). These experiences and his reflections on the Spanish civil war, the Stalinist Terror and the Hitler–Stalin pact presaged a fundamental change in his views.

Koestler became a convinced and articulate anti-communist, alongside other leading figures such as Orwell and Camus. His play *The Gladiator* (1939), which describes a slave revolt and the creation of a new Sun State, provided an obvious parallel with the USSR, with Stalin as Spartacus. This marked his break with communism, which stemmed from a disenchantment with Marxism's failure to develop a credible system of ethics. In *Darkness at Noon* (1940) Koestler developed this argument, and sought to recreate the mental universe of the Russian revolutionaries which justified denunciation and self-incrimination for a higher ideal. In his book *The Yogi and the Commissar* (1945), dedicated to Michael Polanyi, he identified different human propensities: the drive of the ego towards self-assertion and the counter tendency towards self-denial and self-transcendence. He saw moral nihilism as one of the dangers of modern civilisation, reflected in the religious appeal of both communism and fascism, which gave urgency to the need to establish a new system of ethical values.

Darkness at Noon sold 400,000 copies in France in ten years, but on the left Koestler, who supported the United States, and later NATO, as a necessary force for containing communism, was vilified. Congdon devotes an important part of his book to the clash between Koestler and leading French intellectuals, whose pro-communism and anti-Americanism was at its height in 1945–56. He concludes that the secular absolutism of communism had a stronger appeal in countries with Catholic or Orthodox traditions than in Protestant countries. In explaining this admiration for the USSR, he offers the adage 'power tends to attract and absolute power attracts absolutely' (p. 95).

Koestler's view of Soviet communism was attacked by Maurice Merleau-Ponty in the journal *Les Temps modernes*, in a series of articles that were later published

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as *Humanism and Terror: An Essay on the Communist Problem* (1947). Merleau-Ponty attacked Koestler's preoccupation with ends and means, arguing that Marxist dialectics made possible the transcendence of the ends/means problem. All societies both past and present, he argued, employed violence. Marxist terror in the service of communist construction was simply humanism at a particular stage of historical development. Stalin's elimination of the opposition had been necessary for the defence of the country. He prophesied that in the future the victims might be rehabilitated (p. 96). Koestler described the book as 'an almost classic example of the controlled schizophrenia of the closed system'. Nevertheless, Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir supported Merleau-Ponty, branding Koestler an obsessive anti-communist. In response Koestler, in his novel *The Age of Longing* (1951), which decried the West's inability to measure up to the Soviet challenge and its lack of any core beliefs, provided wicked parodies of his chief antagonists, Beatrice Webb, J. D. Bernal and Merleau-Ponty, as exponents of neo-nihilism and double-talk.

The counter-offensive against communism was launched by Richard Crossman's edited volume *The God that Failed* (1949) which assembled the opinions of a galaxy of ex-communist intellectuals who stressed the religions aspect of their past adherence to the cause. This period saw the launching of journals such as *Encounter*, *Survey* and *Problems of Communism*, funded by the CIA, which were intended to provide fora for non-communist intellectuals to counter the advance of communist ideas. A series of major international conferences, again funded by the CIA, were directed to the same end. The first was the Congress for Cultural Freedom held in West Berlin in 1950, with five honorary presidents – Bertrand Russell, Benedetto Croce, John Dewey, Karl Jaspers and Jacques Maritain. Other conferences followed: the Science and Freedom congress in Hamburg in 1953, the Future of Freedom congress in Milan in 1955, and the conference to mark the tenth anniversary of the Congress for Cultural Freedom, in Berlin in 1960.

Congdon analyses the fate of various émigrés of the post-1956 revolution and provides an insight into both the ideological fanaticism and moral certainty that gripped many intellectuals of the period, and their subsequent apostasy. The most extraordinary was Imre Lakatos, in the 1940s a kind of Marxist Raskolnikov, who pressured a young female comrade to commit suicide for the good of the cause, and who after 1956 became a convinced anti-communist in exile in Cambridge and the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). In 1967 he was involved in resisting the demands of student radicals, warning in private correspondence that they would destroy universities as centres of learning and turn them into centres for disseminating social and political propaganda. He identified with the Czechoslovak reformers of 1968, but hoped for strong, assertive US leadership in world politics to contain the Soviet challenge.

Another figure examined is Tibor Szamuely, the scion of a prominent Hungarian communist family, brought up in the USSR, who after 1956 became disillusioned with communism. He described Lukács's classic work *History and Class Consciousness* as 'the best, the frankest, the most wide ranging and powerful exposition of the philosophy of totalitarianism ever written' (p. 146). In the 1960s, as a lecturer at the

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University of Reading, England, he became a major contributor to journals such as *Encounter*, *Survey* and *The Spectator*. In *The Russian Tradition* (1974) he traced the roots of Bolshevism back to the Decembrist Pestel and his ambition to create a 'benevolent and virtuous Police state', and to Tkachev, who Szamuely insisted was a forerunner of Lenin, and a thinker who influenced Marx's later thought. In the 1960s Szamuely became famous for his attacks on the New Left, asserting that their views on prewar fascism sounded 'uncannily as if they had just emanated from the nether depths of the Sorbonne or the LSE' (p. 150).

Congdon also provides a portrait of István Mészáros, who, like his teacher Lukács, dedicated his life to rehabilitating Marxism, developing the notion of 'mediation' to explain the way in which class conflicts were managed. His book *Marx's Theory of Alienation* (1970) emphasised the humanistic side of Marx's thought. Meszaros's political evolution followed a course common among other left-wing intellectuals; the transfer of allegiance and hope from the USSR to Mao's China during the Cultural Revolution, then to Castro's Cuba, then to the various independence and liberation movements of the Third World. He saw the anti-communist revolutions of 1989–91 as a vindication of Marxism, and in his last decades saw feminism as a key to the transition to socialism.

Congdon sees the émigré intellectuals as caught 'between Scylla of nihilism and Charybidis of dogmatism' (p. 151). Koestler turned from art to eastern religions, science and finally parapsychology – 'the reality of the third order' – in search of some integrating value system that would bind man to his fellow man. Aurel Kolnai returned to Christianity, while Michael Polanyi sought to found an ethical system based on the revival of Christianity re-established on new, more secure foundations. Szamuely and Latakos died relatively young, having made the transition from ardent communists to determined anti-communists. Others such as Meszaros and Karl Polanyi remained Marxists to the end.

A radically different view of intellectuals and communism is offered by Birchall, a member of the UK Socialist Workers Party, in a study of Sartre's political writings. His aim is to defend Sartre from accusations of being a Stalinist, a charge frequently made during his lifetime and after his death in 1980. He offers the charitable assessment that 'If Sartre always distrusted Stalinism he was sometimes driven to ally himself with it, though only for brief periods did the alliance have any real substance' (pp. 1–2). Birchall seeks to rehabilitate Sartre as a revolutionary socialist thinker and activist. The book identifies a number of French Trotskyists with whom Sartre was involved, and the book flirts with the idea that Sartre was a kind of crypto-Trotskyist even if he himself failed to realise this.

Sartre was a figure of the left throughout his adult life, but not a card-carrying communist. He was in Berlin when Hitler consolidated his power, and the experience of the Popular Front and the Spanish Civil War also shaped his political development. The Hitler–Stalin pact brought disillusionment and prompted deep reflection: '"So now I am cured of socialism, if I needed to be cured"' (p. 33). The prestige of the French Communist Party (PCF) heightened by its role in the Resistance and its association with the Red Army in the liberation of Europe from Nazi tyranny imbued

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communism with a strong attraction for French intellectuals that was reinforced by the French revolutionary tradition.

The postwar period was a period of intense political polarisation. Sartre and existentialism were attacked by communist intellectuals, such as Roger Garaudy and Henri Lefebvre. In 1945 Sartre launched *Les Temps modernes*, which, under the editorship of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, became the main independent journal of the left in France. It covered the show trials in Eastern Europe, and the rise of Soviet antisemitism. But an article by David Rousset in *Le Figaro littéraire* on the Soviet labour camp system in 1949 produced a defensive article on the Soviet Union from Merleau-Ponty in *Les Temps modernes*, which Sartre approved without himself making a public statement on the issue. Sartre's attempt to create a movement of the non-communist left saw the launch in 1948 of the short-lived Rassemblement démocratique révolutionnaire, named in opposition to de Gaulle's Rassemblement du peuple français.

From 1951 Sartre began a rapprochement with the PCF that continued to 1956, during which he became almost the model fellow-traveller. It is from this period that we have his bizarre assertion that there was total freedom in the USSR (p. 4). He became a prominent and frequent speaker at party meetings and peace conferences, denouncing anti-communism: '"An Anti-Communist is a dog, I stand by that. I'll stand by that for ever"' (p. 134). His flirtation with the PCF was reinforced by the absence of any strong non-communist movement on the left, although he was generally contemptuous of such movements. He rejected Trotskyism because it was based on 'the abstract rationalism of an opposition on a pragmatic irrationalism' (p. 145). In *Les communistes et la paix* (1953) he attacked those on the left who took an anti-communist position.

In 1955 Sartre's comedy *Nekrassov* was performed for the first time. Its subject is a Soviet defector who seeks to discredit the USSR and the willingness of credulous anti-communists to take up his allegations as truth. It was in this play that a character, a communist journalist, expressed the view that it was unwise to reveal the truth about the Soviet labour camps because 'we must not make Billancourt [the Renault factory workers of Billancourt] despair'. The line was subsequently cited, perhaps unfairly, as reflecting Sartre's own belief.

Khrushchev's speech at the 20th congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) and the Hungarian revolution of 1956 together delivered two shattering blows to the Stalinist system. For Sartre this involved also a reappraisal. Early in 1956 he had written of the way in which the PCF displayed '"extraordinary objective intelligence"' (p. 159) and that it was rarely wrong, but at the same time he censured Marxist intellectuals for their failure to develop a Marxism free from Stalinism, censuring particular Marxists for their failure to 'grasp the dialectic'. Only in 1973 was the still deeply Stalinist PCF able to admit that Khrushchev's speech was not a fabrication. And Sartre's own certain grasp of the dialectic seemed less sure with his failure to complete his master work, *Critique de la raison dialectique.*

While Sartre criticised the Soviet invasion of Hungary, he at the same time warned that the Soviet action should not diminish criticism of the French military campaign

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in Algeria. Sartre was one of the most outspoken critics of the French colonial wars in Indo China and then in Algeria. The general political instability of the Fourth Republic also provided strong arguments for intellectuals to remain engaged. Politics was too important to be left to the politicians. He denounced Khrushchev's secret speech for failing to provide a comprehensive analysis of Stalinism and its causes, but his dismissal of it as simply a string of anecdotes suggests that he had not read it very carefully. He retained a sentimental attachment to the USSR, arguing that all men of the left would recognise the necessity of defending the USSR 'for the cause of communism' (p. 165).

Birchall explains the tergiversations of Sartre and the French intellectuals in general by pointing to the exigencies of the class struggle at both a domestic and international level. Sartre's defence of the notion of the ends justifying the needs, even with the qualification that the means also shape the ends, placed him squarely in the tradition of Marxist consequentialist ethics as espoused by Lenin and Trotsky. Birchall argues that Trotsky's position on ethics, outlined in *Their Morals and Ours* (1939), underlines his opposition to Stalinism. This he equates with Sartre's position, although this hardly clinches the argument. When *Their Morals and Ours* was first published it was condemned by the US philosopher John Dewey and by Victor Serge precisely on the grounds that it opened the door to Stalinist terror. If the use of violence is justified in terms of building socialism, who defines what is socialism and who prescribes the measures justified for its construction? Under the Bolshevik conception of party supremacy, the party, or rather those who speak on its behalf, are given carte blanche. On this crucial issue Serge severed his long-standing ties with Trotsky. In *The Rebel* (*L'Homme révolté*) (1951) Albert Camus raised again the issue of political ethics, prompting a heated exchange with Sartre which Birchall only touches on. The same issues were raised by Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*. Birchall makes no reference to the row between Koestler and Merleau-Ponty, Sartre and De Beauvoir on this issue, although Congdon, as noted, does address it.

Birchall hints at some psychological explanation of Sartre's own politics, arguing that it was motivated not so much by admiration of the proletariat than by a 'profound hatred of his own class' and his loathing of the Radical Party, that representative of the French republican bourgeoisie to which his father had belonged (p. 27). At its most charitable the book sees Sartre as an innocent in politics, and it is difficult to dissent from Koestler's view that Sartre lived in an enclosed intellectual system. Sartre's attitude towards the working class combined paternalism, idealisation and distrust. He thought that workers would accept the communist trade-off of political freedoms for economic benefits. The experience of communist rule in eastern Europe confounded that assumption. His concern for the plight of intellectuals and workers under capitalism in France did not sensitise him to the even worse fate of their peers in the USSR, which could be justified in terms of the problems of creating the new socialist society.

In the 1960s Sartre was proud to declare himself a Marxist, and to abandon his attempt to develop existentialism as a separate philosophy, drawing inspiration from Lukács, George Lefebvre, Lucien Goldman and Daniel Guérin. He supported the

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student revolutionaries of 1968, and subsequently lent his backing to French Maoist groupuscules, on the grounds that he was defending freedom of speech, but this also illustrates Sartre's naive belief that there were no enemies on the left.

While Congdon explains the appeal of communism to intellectuals by its quasi-religious character, and Birchall explains its appeal in terms of the realpolitik of the class struggle, Abrams explains its appeal to Czech intellectuals in terms of the dilemmas of the Czechoslovak state and the nature of Czech culture. This follows the analysis developed earlier in a famous article by H. Gordon Skilling on the political culture of Czechoslovakia. Czechoslovakia, the one country in central Europe that in the 1930s clung to its democratic institutions until its dismemberment through the infamous Munich Agreement of 1938, was also the only country which embraced communism with enthusiasm. Disenchantment with the West prepared the ground for identification with the triumphant Soviet Union through a notion of Slavic solidarity. The upsurge of anti-German feeling at the end of the war and the hope that Soviet-type communism would provide a vehicle for modernisation and progress shaped public perceptions of politics at the end of the war.

Abrams emphasises the impact of the Second World War in destroying the foundations of the old order and providing the preconditions for the communist takeover. This was associated with the numerical growth of the working class, with a high proportion of the population concentrated in the younger age cohorts. The Czech intelligentsia had strong popular roots and an established reputation as the moral and spiritual leaders of society, and as a group which had suffered much during the occupation. The striking number of leading figures with backgrounds in sociology (such as Masaryk, Beneš), also suggested a close engagement with the social question. Abrams focuses on four groups of intellectuals in the Czech lands: communists, democratic socialists, and Catholics and Protestants. In the period 1945–8 there remained a lively and diverse press, which provides the basis for a systematic study of how these four currents reacted to contemporary developments. Abrams looks at the way in which these different groups interpreted the history of the country and the failure of the first Czechoslovak state in 1938.

In the parliamentary elections in 1946 the Communist Party won 40 per cent of the vote, with 75 per cent of the electorate voting for parties of the left. Some 25,000 communists had lost their lives in the struggle during the German occupation of the Protectorate (p. 93). This greatly strengthened the party's patriotic credentials and its ability to identify itself with the defence of the state. The Communist Party was also closely linked to the Social Democratic Party, and it controlled the Revolutionary Trade Union Movement.

The main party among the democratic socialists was the National Socialist Party, a non-Marxist party and the party of Beneš, which supported reform and adopted a friendly stance towards Soviet Union. Catholic intellectuals represented one source of opposition to communism, but the Catholic church had lost ground since the First World War. The Catholic People's Party distanced itself from the Vatican, took a strong anti-fascist line in the 1930s and opposed the Munich agreement. During the

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war 500 priests were sent to concentration camps and the church did not collaborate. The natural ally of the People's Party was the National Socialist Party, but the latter's strong anticlericalism impeded co-operation. The People's Party's strong criticisms of the USSR's persecution of religion drew sharp retorts from the Communist Party, which dismissed them as slanders. Protestant intellectuals were associated with the Czech Church, which was not strictly Protestant, and the Evangelical Church, both of which had strong radical traditions.

Abrams explains the ease of the communist takeover by the prevailing public mood. Pavel Tigrid, a leading Catholic intellectual, referred to the 'fanaticization of the younger working class and student generation' (p. 151). Karel Severa spoke of the 'fetish of revolution', and the visible 'revolutionary fever, revolutionary psychosis, revolutionary craze' which he argued corresponded to 'an internal confusion, an unrest in people who have lost the sense of connection, continuity, tradition ... in people who are no longer tied to anything – to the country, to the family, to society, to God, even to themselves' (p. 153). It involved a reorientation towards the East, without which, Josef Macürek opined, 'our nationality will not continue to exist' (p. 158).

But the rise of the Communist Party was also part of a more profound transformation, an attempt to remake the nation, to rewrite its history, and to overcome the humiliation of the dissolution of the first republic in 1938–9. This had a broad appeal. Some of the leaders of the Czech Church welcomed the establishment of the People's Democracy, and saw it as their goal 'to strengthen the moral conviction of the Czechoslovak people in favour of socialism' (p. 81). Against this background the failure of intellectuals to resist more effectively the communist takeover becomes comprehensible. It culminated in the gross tactical miscalculation of the National Socialist, People Party and Slovak Democrats in 1948, which, by tendering their resignation from the government, handed power to the Communist Party. This ushered in the passive revolution, the institution of Soviet-type communism, and the period of high Stalinism that lasted until 1953.

Françoise Mayer's book is concerned with the construction of the legitimacy of the new Czechoslovak state after 1989 and of the Czech state after 1993, as part of the process of decommunisation. It examines various discourses on communism, focusing primarily on the memoirs of leading actors and looks at the role of collective memory in the affirmation of the deep values and convictions of the society, the system of symbols and the way in which symbols are reinvented to take account of changes in the nature of power. The termination of the Communist Party's monopoly of power in November 1989 opened the way to the round table discussions between the communist authorities and the opposition. This was shaped by the upsurge of popular pressure from below. The playwright Václav Havel, the leading dissident spokesman, founder of Charter 77, pilloried by the communist regime as a rightist, capitalist restorer and agent of imperialism, sought to find a language to legitimise the new order. He spoke of restoring human values, re-establishing a civic culture, reasserting independent spiritual, human values and struggling against the 'lie'. This discourse aimed to draw as many people, including those ambivalent towards the

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Chartists, including the 1.6 million communist party members, into supporting the change. The creation of the myth of the 'dissident nation', Mayer argues, served to forge an integrated memory. The laws on lustration, and the prosecution of those associated with crimes of the old order and of the collaborators of the secret police, were designed so as not to polarise society.

Mayer argues that Havel sought to construct the image of the Czech people as a heroic, martyr people wedded to liberty, as victims of betrayal, but also resisters. He looks at the way in which these images were shaped by the response to the failure of the first republic, the complex of Munich. The experience of communism encompassed the early years of enthusiasm, the outpouring of self-assertion in 1968 and the years of social inertia and conformism of Normalisation. The book is based on a comparison of the memoirs of the communist and the anti communist, the self-justifications of the normalisers – Gustáv Husák, Miloš Jakeš, Miroslav Štěpán, and Miroslav Vacek, and the views of the dissidents and those who sought the status of dissident – Václav Havel, Václav Klaus, Petr Uhl and Václav Banda. The book offers interesting insights into the process of reshaping memory and identity in the post-communist Czech Republic. Mayer uses the notion of legitimacy and of the public and private sphere, but fails to develop these into a dynamic tool for analysing the processes under examination.

Mayer sees Havel as playing a role after 1989 similar to that of de Gaulle in France after 1945. While de Gaulle sought to reunite France under the myth of the Resistance, so Havel sought to reunite the Czech under the myth of the nation of dissidents. This comparison needs to be handled with care. As Abrams shows, the Czechs in 1939–45 suffered far more than the French under the German occupation. The suppression of the public sphere by the communist authorities had profound implications as regards notions of individual and group identity, private and public memory, and attitudes towards authority. In the case of Czechoslovakia in 1989 the re-emergence of a public sphere dramatically transformed public attitudes and expectations with a rapidity that took the communist authorities and the dissidents themselves by surprise.

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