

Were Western Intellectuals Blind? Simone de Beauvoir on her Visits to the USSR

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Abstract

The article focuses on the part of the fourth autobiographic book by French writer and philosopher Simone de Beauvoir *Tout compte fait* (English: *All Said and Done*, 1974) wherein she talks about her and Jean-Paul Sartre's trips to the USSR in the 60s. The author of the article questions the widespread opinion that the Western leftist intellectuals, because of their political leanings, were unable to understand the realities of the Communist regime. The article concludes that Beauvoir was able to see the USSR critically and the image of political and cultural life she presents in her book is generally consistent with the opinion of the liberal intellectuals of the USSR of that time.

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Although Simone de Beauvoir is most famous for her ground-breaking books on the situation of women, *Le Deuxième Sexe* (1949; English: *The Second Sex*, 1953), elderly people, *La Vieillesse*, 1970 (English: *Old Age and The Coming of Age*, both 1972), and fiction, she also contributed to travel writing with books about her journeys through the United States, *L'Amérique au jour le jour* (1948, English: *America Day by Day*, 1954) and China *La Longue Marche* (*The Long March*, 1957). She deliberately worked on creating an image of herself as an intellectual woman and became a new role model for women of the twentieth century. Although the four other nonfictional books published by Beauvoir from the late 50s to the early 70s are usually referred to as autobiographies or memoirs, they contain an important amount of travel writing, especially the last book, *All Said and Done* (*Tout compte fait*, 1972). According to feminist researcher Toril Moi, the text of this book, in contrast to the intimate confessions of the previous volumes, 'often reads as an account of de Beauvoir's and Sartre's public engagements. On their trips to the Soviet Union, Japan, Egypt and Israel, the two writers are treated like royalties.' (Moi VIII). Sartre, who was Beauvoir's lifelong companion and who refused to accept the 1964 Nobel Prize, thereby gaining even more notoriety, was widely invited to, and eagerly participated in, various political and social events. While their celebrity status had some advantages during their travels, it also inevitably hampered their ability to freely move and choose with whom to communicate, thus reducing their opportunities to see the less official side of the country.

The article's question, 'Were Western Intellectuals Blind?', was provoked by allegations, particularly from right-wing political forces, that Western intellectuals had been unaware of, or even blind to, the crimes of Communist regimes. In particular, this critique is often applied to the French, although the position and attitudes of the left-wing intellectuals varied greatly there and, what is even more important, changed over time. The distrust in left-wing political movements, characteristic of post-communist societies, is evident in the fact that the visit of Joseph Brodsky, the winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, was commemorated in 2000 by hanging a memorial plaque on the house where he stayed, whereas Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, who also visited Lithuania, never received such honour.

After World War II, the French Communist Party was the largest political party in France and many influential thinkers, such as Sartre, flirted with it. In fact, the reaction of French intellectuals to the crimes of Communist regimes, especially during Stalin's time, varied from simple rejection to outright approval. As British historian Tony Judt points out, the reaction of post-war French intellectuals to the crimes of Communist leaders ranged from radical rejection (such was the position of Raymond Aron) to simple acceptance (the position of active members of the Communist Party). The most challenging approach was that of intellectuals such as Sartre who were

acknowledging honestly (as they saw it) the realities of Communist experience in all its horrors, and yet so explaining the latter as to be left with an experience and project worthy of dreams and defensible in their own philosophical and ethical language. (Judt 119)

The changing situation in the Soviet Union affected the positions of pro-Communists abroad. The so-called Khrushchev thaw not only disclosed the existence of labour camps and purges within high-ranking party officials during the Stalin regime, but also made Western intellectuals increasingly aware of the dissident trials and anti-Semitic campaigns taking place in later decades. Sartre's relationship and rhetoric towards the USSR kept changing. The 60s were his most intense years of collaboration with Soviet writers as well as with pro-soviet peace organizations. Beauvoir acknowledges that, 'As for our relations with the Communist Party and the socialist countries, there I followed Sartre in his fluctuations.' (Beauvoir 27). From 1962 to 1966, Beauvoir and Sartre began visiting the Soviet Union regularly, spending several weeks in different parts of the country during each trip.

Although Beauvoir loved travelling, unlike her companion Sartre, she did not like official events and considered the boredom of committees and sessions 'unbearable', preferring to focus on everyday social life, material conditions, local arts and historical sights. However, not being formally committed, she was able to focus on preparation for the trip. Beauvoir not only loved traveling, she also saw travel as an opportunity for personal growth. As she points out,

A journey is also a personal adventure, a change in my relationship with the world, with space and time. It often begins with the bewilderment: the novelty of the place and the people make me lose my head and I am filled with a desire to do a very great many things and do them all at once. (Beauvoir 213)

In all her autobiographies, Beauvoir describes herself as being inquisitive from childhood. She attributes her passion for travelling to her character,

Thanks to my sanguine habit of the mind, I am persuaded that I shall soon manage to conquer this reality that is overwhelming me for a moment. Its immense abundance takes me out of myself and gives an illusion of infinity. (Beauvoir 213)

In *All Said and Done* she writes that she used to read everything possible about a country she was going to visit and made notes while travelling, later using them for her books. Judging by how detailed the writer's descriptions of the countryside are, one can assume that she kept notes during her journeys and used them while writing her books later.

Before coming to the USSR, Beauvoir was already familiar with works revealing the reality of Soviet labour camps, such as Eugenia Ginzburg's *Journey into the Whirlwind* and Alexander Solzhenitsyn's writings. She viewed the latter unevenly: she liked *One day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* and *Matriona's House* very much, but claimed to not recognize his voice in *The First Circle* (Beauvoir 163-164). It is worth noting that she indicated her reasons as to why *Cancer Ward* 'gripped [her] right away': even though she was 'already well informed about life in the Soviet Union', her knowledge was only 'abstract knowledge, whereas Solzhenitsyn's was immediate and concrete' (Beauvoir 165). One can guess that such life experiences told by people who lived them reveal the true realities of a country. Since Beauvoir did not speak Russian, she had to rely on the writers also referred to as 'our friends in the Soviet Union', such as translator Lena Zonina, liberal art critic and journalist Ivan Doroch and writer Ilya Erenburg, whose novel *Thaw* inspired the poetic name for the Khrushchev period. Only a few of Beauvoir's interpretations reflect the official Soviet government's view distinct from the historical truth; for instance, she states that the Crimean Tatars had been deported for their collaboration with the Germans during World War II (Beauvoir 294), when in fact this was the consequence of the Stalinist repression, to eliminate the possibility of the Tatars opposing the government's control. It should be kept in mind that muscovite Zonina, who provided information to Beauvoir, did not always comprehend the complicated historical nuances of national minorities. However, Beauvoir was sensitive to the cultural diversity which the Soviet regime tried to eliminate. When Beauvoir claims that she was interested in the evolution of the USSR and that she 'was attracted both by the variety of its landscapes and the beauty of its former cultural wealth' (Beauvoir 282), it is possible to infer that its former cultural wealth was destroyed by the current regime.

She discusses the ever-changing cultural situation, with new regulations every year regarding, for instance, what the censorship allowed to be published, and pays particular attention to the persecution of writers, re-telling

stories of their trials, notably those of the poet Joseph Brodsky and prose writers Daniel and Sinyavsky. Beauvoir discusses not only the everyday life of ordinary people, the food supply situation, the shortages and queues, but also how she resents the absurd bans on foreigners to travel free within the country (Yalta Eastern coast was off-limits to foreigners; Beauvoir and Sartre were not permitted to take taxis from Vladimir to Moscow, in the Baltic countries tourist were only allowed to the capitals) and mandatory bothersome government procured chaperons. The only way the two French philosophers could get some glimpses of obscure Soviet political and cultural life was by traveling on their own on public transportation.

Although aware that she was amongst the elite, after a New Year's celebration, Beauvoir marked it as a sign of progress that the Soviet people were allowed to wear elegant clothes and to listen to Western jazz (Beauvoir, 287). Although psychiatric institutions in the USSR were inaccessible and Beauvoir was aware of prohibition of psychoanalysis because of its Western origins, the guests were given permission to visit the Psychiatric Institute. In addition to Moscow and Leningrad, Beauvoir and Sartre, accompanied by Zonina, also visited the Crimea, Kiev, Estonia, Lithuania, Armenia, and Georgia. Beauvoir realized that the Soviet people saw her and Sartre as a source of knowledge about the West; thus, at various events she answered questions about Western intellectual trends, such as the French *Nouveau Roman* and Italian neo-realistic cinema. Soviet people took such meetings as a promise of hope for cooperation and openness to the world. However, some intellectuals, especially dissidents, condemned the philosophers for their cooperation with Soviet officials (for example, Alexander Solzhenitsyn refused to meet Jean-Paul Sartre). These visits are still shrouded in controversy, and some researchers are sceptical about the significance of their visits. Oleg Gordijevsky, a former colonel of the KGB, was of the opinion that Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir were 'useful idiots' for the Soviet system (Seymour-Jones 424) and that their visits were used by the Soviets to improve their image abroad in the Cold War atmosphere.

Half a century has passed since Beauvoir's travels to the USSR and since *All Said and Done* was published, yet this book still remains a valuable account of the 60s. As a documentary narrator, Beauvoir does not show any empathy or compassion for the people whose lives she is describing; she does not try to place blame for their troubles nor does she question the sense of creating a communist society. This is due to her narrative style and worldview. Nevertheless, Beauvoir's account of the situation in the 60s is very close to that presented by local memoirists and thus negates the stereotype that Westerners, especially those of the left-wing, were not able to assess the complexity of Soviet reality.

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