

The War Diaries of Jean-Paul Sartre

By Jean-Paul Sartre
Pantheon, 366 pp, \$17.95

By Diana Johnstone

IT WAS THE PHONEY WAR. AND there on the quiet Alsatian front was Jean Paul Sartre, a most unlikely soldier, madly filling notebook after notebook with thoughts on how to achieve "authenticity." To find Sartrean authenticity emerging from the Phoney War is reason enough to savor *The War Diaries*.

This translation by Quintin Hoare includes only five of the 14 notebooks (the others are missing) Sartre filled between Sept. 14, 1939, a fortnight after World War II broke out, and March 28, 1940.

In addition, he was writing letters daily to his mother, Simone de Beauvoir and other friends, working on his novel *The Age of Reason*, devouring volumes of fiction and history and, incidentally, carrying out his military duties of weather observation, which can't have been too onerous. The amount of reading and writing Sartre could cram into a day is staggering, and it's first-rate stuff, Sartre in the throes of intellectual discovery, when the world was young.

However unsuited to army life, Sartre "assumed" the war and this marked a turning point in his thinking. "The war and Heidegger put me on the right path," he noted in March 1940.

In the company of men

Sartre always sought the company of women and didn't like men, but there he was stuck with male company. He played the "moral clown." He related to the other men by observing their moral behavior, that is, their systems of self-deception and self-justification, and offering criticism. "I amuse myself by teaching them freedom." This was field study for his philosophical work.

Exploration of his key concept "authenticity" fed on what he had recently absorbed from philosopher Martin Heidegger and on observing the inauthentic ways of his comrades. (Although it is his own inauthenticity that really bothered him.) On the most ordinary level, he objected to the soldierly habit of passive griping, the complaints of men who neither revolt nor accept responsibility for what they go along with.

"Only those men who have accepted to be the martyrs of peace do not deserve war," he wrote harshly. And later on, "The further I go, the more I see that men deserve war.... This war—we have all declared it at one moment or another. But then instead of paying for it, instead of saying, 'It's my war' and trying to live it, they all take refuge from it in poses. They refuse it with bad faith, exactly as one refuses a fault one has just committed. They cover it over with a veil of *natural* and *normal*. And when peace comes, all those bastards will by turns benefit from the innocent victim's aureole and from the war veteran's laurels."

Heidegger's influence came along to "teach me authenticity and historicity just at the very moment when war was about to make these notions indispensable to me."

"...For Heidegger's philosophy is a free assumption of his epoch. And his epoch was precisely a tragic epoch of *Untergang* and de-



DIARIES

Sartre on authenticity and the Phony War

spair for Germany.... So I can rediscover Heidegger's assumption of his destiny as a German, in that wretched Germany of the postwar years, in order to help me assume my destiny as a Frenchman in the France of '40."

France was in for a more humiliating destiny than he then realized. The *Diaries* are also a precious document on the illusions of the Phoney War. Sartre observed the low morale of French soldiers, their vandalistic looting of evacuated Alsatian farmhouses, but rejoiced at the "dissolution of the military spirit" in France as a sign that war, in industrial society, was being "civilized."

He was aware that in Germany the spirit was entirely different. "If, however, I place my hopes in a final victory of the pluto democracies, I'm relying not on their heroism, but on their wealth. I'm reckoning on a war without 'greatness'—principally economic. In that case, 'decadence' can remain harmless—indeed becomes a positive factor."

The relatively few pages of the diary dealing with the war itself are illuminating. Sartre grasped perfectly why Britain and France could appease Hitler's demands on Czechoslovakia at Munich in 1938 and then declare war on Germany over Hitler's aggression against Poland the next year. "It's the bourgeoisie which prevented war in '38 and decided the capitulation at Munich, from fear of victory even more than of defeat; it was afraid war might benefit communism."

"In September '39, on the other hand, war was welcomed by the bourgeoisie—because the Russo-German treaty discredited communism; and because everyone now realizes that this war, which is being waged directly or indirectly against the Soviets, will necessarily be accompanied by a police operation domestically. The Communist Party will be dissolved. What 10 years of politics haven't been able to achieve, the war will achieve in a month. Such,

it seems to me, is the main reason why the bourgeoisie rallied to the war.

"Beneath its trappings of a national war, it's to a great extent a civil war. ...War in '38 could have been the occasion for a revolution—in '40 it's the occasion for a counterrevolution. The war of '38 would have been a 'left' war that, of '39 is a 'right' war. Hitler's blunder was not to see that, in '38, the capitalist democracies were defending themselves on two

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fronts, threatened in their imperialism by Nazi ambitions, they were threatened in their inner constitution by Communist action. They didn't want war, lest they should have to defend themselves on two fronts at once. By making a common front with Stalin, Hitler relieves them by allowing them to expel communism—henceforth viewed as an *external* danger."

In a propagandistic terminology of the time, the war became one between the "proletarian peoples" (Germany, Russia) and the "pluto democracies" (the rich Atlantic imperial democracies). It was believed in France that France and England, connected by the Atlantic Ocean to the U.S., were in position to win a war of attrition. The strains of war effort would defeat the encircled German economy, causing it to collapse from within.

The inaction on the Western front known as the Phoney War, while Germany and the USSR polished off Poland and Finland to the East, was understood in France as part of the economic war. World War I's stagnant trench warfare had shown (shown the French, that is) that modern industrial nations' strong defenses had rendered offensive war useless.

The specter of total war was thought to be an effective deterrent. The defensive posture behind the Maginot Line was all the more comfortable for the French in that they had got all the territory they wanted from the previous war. "Thus the French armies on the German frontier have no purpose other than to force Germany to adopt a war economy destined to make their blockade effective," Sartre wrote.

False allies

As the months passed, however, Sartre noted the falseness of the allied assumption that "time is on our side." The Germans were consolidating gains to the East and in Scandinavia, while limiting their activity along French lines to protesting their desires for peace. "Most of the men are fairly receptive to the Hitler propaganda. They're getting bored, 'morale' is sinking," Sartre noted.

The French from the start "weren't sustained by any patriotic or ideological ideal. They didn't like Hitlerism, but they weren't wild about democracy either—and they didn't give a bugger about Poland. Into the bargain, they had the vague impression of having been tricked."

Called up by the general mobilization at the age of 34, shortly after his first success as a novelist with *Nausea*, Sartre himself rallied to the war out of dislike for Nazism and as a bourgeois of a particular type: a member of the French teaching civil service. For the first time, he examined himself thoroughly, situating his freedom in his specific history. His family background of public service was favorable to a certain kind of individualism, a disinterest in property ownership, a great liberty of personal behavior backed by certainty that the paycheck would arrive monthly until the end of one's days.

Sartre acknowledged that he was "truly what the Nazis call 'the abstract man of the plutocracies,'" and added: "I have no liking for this character, and I want to change. What I have realized is that freedom is not the Stoic detachment from loves and goods at all. On the contrary, it supposes a deep rootedness in the world." ■

Lesbians Nuns: Breaking Silence

By Rosemary Curb and Nancy Manahan

Naiad Press, 383 pp, \$9.95

By Laura Cottingham

LESBIAN BOOKS, FICTION and nonfiction, seldom attract attention. But *Lesbian Nuns: Breaking Silence* has piqued curiosity and condemnation in mainstream, Catholic and feminist circles alike, making it the most controversial lesbian book since Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* went on trial for obscenity in 1928. A collection of 50 autobiographical stories written by nuns and ex-nuns and published by a small Florida-based press, *Lesbian Nuns* has received national attention far beyond anything Naiad would have predicted given the meager response to its other 60 volumes during the past 12 years.

The book's editors, former nuns Rosemary Curb and Nancy Manahan, have appeared on radio and TV programs in every major American city, including the Phil Donahue show. Dozens of newspapers and magazines—including the *New York Times* and *Newsweek*—have printed stories.

In Boston, Channel 4 (NBC) canceled an interview with the editors after an archdiocese spokesman announced the program as "an affront to the sensitivity of Roman Catholics." Of course, any commotion the Catholic Church stirs up only adds to publicity. As Warner Books, the owner of paperback rights, told the *Times*: "We're not counting on controversy with the church, but it's there, it's there. And it's going to sell books."

Though church indignation is predictable and probably unavoidable, the feminist response is neither. Before the book's release, Naiad publisher Barbara Grier sold excerpt rights to *Forum*, part of Bob Guccione's *Penthouse* publishing empire. When this information appeared in the feminist monthly *off our backs*, readers were quick to show their anger and feelings of betrayal.

The most severe and extensive reprimands came from the contributors themselves, who were not informed of Naiad's plans to serialize in *Forum*: many said they would not have agreed to appear in the anthology if they had known. Grier did little to allay the anger, claiming she gave *Forum* the excerpts so *Lesbian Nuns* "could reach women we wouldn't otherwise reach."

Far from sensational

But despite all the sensationalism surrounding the book, it's far from sensational. None of the stories indicts the Church or resembles pornography or does anything else that would explain why *Lesbian Nuns* is on its way to the pages of *Forum* and the best-seller list. Such mass-market popularity attests to America's ignorance about both lesbians and nuns: to most readers, the title probably sounds oxymoronic or even naughty.

Actually, *Lesbian Nuns* fits into a genre of books that started appearing in the late '60s: homosexual "coming out" anthologies. Books in this genre include Margaret Cruikshank's *The Lesbian Path* (1980), which contains the stories of two former nuns: Rosemary Curb and Nancy Manahan. Cruikshank introduced the

two women and encouraged them to begin a project that became, after communication with several hundred lesbian nuns and ex-nuns, *Lesbian Nuns: Breaking Silence*.

The women who contributed to this collection tried unsuccessfully to reconcile their beliefs, needs and sexuality with Catholic dogma. Most of them terminated their vows, and many abandoned Catholicism and organized religion altogether.

One woman writes: "The very setting which could have fostered

women loving women prohibited its strongest bonding force. We could have had power as women together, but the flaw in the scenario, what prevented the convent from the fullest realization of its potential as a separatist society, was sex. Homophobia operated in the convent with even more force than in society at large."

Another nun remembers: "I decided to leave the cloister because of the radical changes made by the ecumenical movement and Pope John XXIII...and my lesbianism

was coming to an uncontrollable point. I wanted to have a physical relationship with a woman, and I could not do it because of my respect for my vows."

Although the voices in *Lesbian Nuns* speak from particularly sexually repressed experiences—most were raised Catholic, all took vows of celibacy—the individual recognitions of lesbianism sound a lot like any other woman's movement toward lesbian self-identity. Becoming a lesbian is a struggle for all women who arrive at that self-definition. No matter at what age a woman recognizes her same-sex attractions, she has to first find a name for her feelings and then choose to identify herself in opposition to assumed heterosexuality—or in the case of the nuns, enforced asexuality.

As Rosemary Curb observes about her sister contributors, the acknowledgement of lesbian desire or identity sometimes takes years. "On the average," she writes, "we discovered ourselves as Lesbians in our mid-30s—usually only after we had several intimate relationships with women either in or out of the convent." Or as one nun, still living her vows, puts it: "In junior high and high school, I felt an attraction toward some girlfriends: I wanted to be with them, walk them home, carry their books, go on dates, call them on the telephone, give them

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gifts...but if you asked me when I was 24 if I was a lesbian, I would have said, 'No.' Now, at 30, I say, 'Yes, definitely.'"

Another contributor writes, "'Homosexuality' was not part of my vocabulary until age 25. 'Lesbian' entered my vocabulary at age 32. I had been in love with a woman emotionally, romantically and sexually for six years at that point." Throughout the personal accounts, what surfaces again and again is the impossibility of knowing something—lesbianism—when there's no frame of reference, or even the word with which to name it.

The rules and customs of the different religious orders vary: some are strict (the book includes one account of self-flagellation), others comparatively liberal, especially after the breakdown of traditional Catholicism imposed by Vatican II. But all the orders described required a vow of celibacy. In taking the celibacy vow, only heterosexual behavior was assumed and warned against. Writing about the awakening of her sexual feelings, Coriander remembers thinking to herself: "Was I still celibate? If not, what was I doing in the convent? No one had

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ever said that celibacy meant not loving women."

If the testimony in *Lesbian Nuns* can be considered a fairly accurate sociological sampling, then mid-20th century American convents are a retreat for middle and working-class women who realize their life options come down to marriage and motherhood, working at the five-and-dime or the nunnery.

According to Nancy Manahan, most of the contributors entered religious life "to escape marriage, to receive an education and to live in a community of women." Or, as Sonja writes, "[My parents] couldn't afford to send me to college to become a physical education teacher, although my younger brother went. Girls studied typing, boys went to college. At least, if I went to the convent, I would get to go to college."

For many, the convent offered not only otherwise-impossible educational opportunities, but their only introduction to middle-class comfort as well. Kevyn remembers: "Here I had taken a vow of poverty and I had never eaten so well in my entire life...[my friend] was sent home because of her health. She had never eaten such good food. She overate and got an ulcer."

Donna parallels the convent for low-income women with the army "option" that exists for low-income men. She suggests that the women's movement should, like the peace movement, establish a counter-recruitment program for young women that would stress alternative job and educational opportunities.

Lesbian Nuns isn't the single voice of one author—it's a collection of many voices. But what do all these individual narratives hold in common? The book is about women overcoming the war waged

against sexual self-expression. The convent experience is really just a backdrop, albeit an interesting one.

And what of the nuns, lesbian and not—how will they react to this book? Two of the women who recount their experiences and use their real names are still nuns: how will this affect their social and religious positions? One sister predicts that "Lesbian nuns I know are going to dance! In convents this book will go around like hotcakes, just the way *The Hite Report* did in my community.... The book will also be an occasion for confronting a lot of pain. Lesbian sisters who are not out in their communities (and I don't know anyone who's out) will have to listen to homophobic reactions. But it will be a catalyst.

"All hell's going to break loose. Religious communities are going to have to discuss the book. They're going to have to respond to reality, and they've never had to do that."

Laura Cottingham is a columnist and a contributing editor for the *New York Native* and a regular contributor to *off our backs*. A longer version of this article appeared in the *Village Voice*.



Lesbian Nuns: Breaking Silence

Lesbian Nuns is about women overcoming the war waged against sexual self-expression—the convent is just a backdrop.