

Tortured children

If it did not already, the world now knows more clearly than ever what Palestinians think of 20 years of Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The mainstream news media are compelled to show images of violence and repression. Perhaps some reporters might turn to the mountains of data explaining just why Palestinian rage burns strongly enough to defy heavily armed soldiers and from time to time to die at their hands. Earlier this year William Swing, bishop of California in the Episcopal diocese of that state, was one of those seeking—in vain, mostly—to publicize a report called *Children in Israeli Military Prisons*, researched and written by Rev. Canon Riah Abu El-Assal, pastor of Christ Evangelical Church in Nazareth; Dina Lawrence, cultural anthropologist from California, and Karen White, author and journalist from Florida.

As it says by way of introduction, "This report explores the imprisonment and torture of Palestinian children (i.e., persons under 18) living in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, areas that have been under the authority of the Israeli military occupation army since the 1967 war. The frequent and pervasive practice of child imprisonment and torture makes this issue one of the gravest, requiring immediate and focused attention."

Apologists for the Israeli General Security Services, or Shin Bet, claim that the brutal methods and mendacious court testimony of Shin Bet, exposed in May 1987 when the conviction of a soldier was overturned, are necessary when dealing with "terrorists" in the occupied territories. As the authors of the report say, "Some of the 'terrorists and potential terrorists' are in fact 10 and 11-year-old children. Many are 12, 13 and 14 years old and are currently crowding the Israeli military prisons in the West Bank

and Gaza. Many are the victims of arbitrary arrest, sometimes while attending classes in school; all are subject to systematic humiliation, beatings and torture during the course of interrogation and imprisonment, and all are denied full due process of law.... The *modus operandi* of Israeli military rule dictates that every child, whether held for two hours in detention or sentenced to two months in prison, is subjected to systematic intimidation, humiliation and excessive physical abuse. The West Bank affiliate to the Geneva-based International Commission of Jurists cites, as a matter of official Israeli government policy, the indiscriminate detention, humiliation and intimidation of Palestinian persons in general."

The children are denied due process, often imprisoned without charge and released without trial having been held incommunicado, denied visits by family, attorney, Red Cross and any representative of a human rights organization. They are often sentenced on the basis of a "confession" extracted after beatings. There is no appeals process. The burden of proof is on the child to establish innocence. The "confessions" they sign are in Hebrew which mostly they cannot read, so often they have no knowledge of what they have put their names to. Rearrest is likely.

Here's a case in the report, by no means the most appalling, concerning Ibrahim: "In April 1987, at 9:00 a.m., Ibrahim and seven friends were standing at the door of their school. A group of eight Israeli soldiers, passing by the school on a routine foot patrol in the street, saw the boys and they began to run away in fear; the Israeli soldiers pursued them through the streets. When the soldiers caught them, they pushed the boys roughly against a wall, with

the boys' faces toward the wall. The soldiers then began to beat all the boys with wooden truncheons and iron rods on their bodies—on their heads, backs, arms, legs and knees. Four of the boys were 13 years old and four of them were 14 or 15 years old. The Israeli soldiers put the eight boys into an Israeli border guard jeep, all of them face-down and piled on top of each other. It seemed to Ibrahim that the soldiers drove them through the streets for a very long time as though the soldiers were showing the boys to the people in the street. The entire time the boys rode in the jeep the Israeli soldiers kicked them with their boots and beat them with wooden truncheons on their heads, backs and legs.

"The boys were taken to the military headquarters in Khan Younis, dragged out of the jeep and forced to stand in the courtyard with their arms raised over their heads for one-half hour. There were two others there, so the group became 10 in all, aged 12-15 years old. There were many Israeli soldiers there in the courtyard and they yelled at the boys, using profane language and making obscene insults about Ibrahim's mother, father and sisters. The soldiers frightened him when they kept telling him: 'We will not be merciful to you.' The Israeli soldiers beat all the boys in the courtyard with their fists."

Ibrahim and the others were then taken to a police station, then interrogated and taken to Ansar II, a prison in Gaza City. "The police handed the boys over to the Israeli soldiers at the prison. They took his possessions from him, and four soldiers beat Ibrahim with their fists as they escorted him to a small room with 35 other youths aged 12-20 years old. Ibrahim was not allowed to leave the room for 15 days. Each day he

was given one piece of bread, a glass of tea and one egg to eat three times, at breakfast, lunch and dinner time. He could use the toilet only once a day for 1½ minutes. Once a week he could bathe with a pot of cold water but was not given soap or a towel. Each boy was allowed two minutes in which to bathe. Each night the soldiers threw stones onto the asbestos roof of the room, about six to eight times each night, awakening the boys from sleep. Ibrahim had two thin, dirty blankets—one for a pillow and one to cover himself, and he was cold. Each day when the water supply for the 35 youths was exhausted, they had to wait for several hours till more water was brought to them. Many of the children in the room aged 12-16 years, had bruises, contusions and swelling on their faces, arms, legs and other parts of their bodies as a result of beatings during interrogation. They cried a lot. The boys in the room asked for a doctor but none came. The soldiers told the boys if they are sick to drink water. Ibrahim went to court and was released on 3,000 NIS bond."

The woman who nailed Ginsburg

Nina Totenberg was the National Public Radio (NPR) reporter who first acquainted the American people with the encouraging news that Supreme Court nominee Douglas Ginsburg had "experimented"—rather frequently, it seems—with marijuana. By thus disclosing Ginsburg's extra-legal practices as a law professor, Totenberg finished him off as a Supreme Court candidate, leaving us with the "mainstream conservative" Anthony Kennedy; your average Joe Sixpack judge, a racist, sexist angel of capital. It seems that when Totenberg went to Harvard to check Ginsburg out, she came to the conclusion that he was a "self-hating Jew." At least this is what she told Michael Moore, who reports the exchange in the premiere issue of his *Moore's Weekly*, a newsletter about media censorship and distortion.

Totenberg said to Moore that people in Harvard told her that "Ginsburg had allegedly once asked, 'Why do we spend so much money to defend Israel?' and he implied that it would be better for the U.S. to be on friendlier terms with the Arab countries." Moore goes on to write, "Totenberg later called to reassure me that her personal feelings did not get in the way of her Ginsburg reporting. 'I'm a cultural, not a religious Jew,' she offered. 'I'm not an Israeli-contributing, nor a particularly Israeli-loving Jew.'" She was not particularly pleased with Moore, either, since he was asking her why she had first denied to him, then confirmed to a *Los Angeles Times* reporter that she herself had once experimented with the demon weed (but, needless to say, had flung it from her like a poisoned thing). Then Moore enquired why she had been fired from her job on the *National Observer* for plagiarizing a story about Tip O'Neill from the *Washington Post*. "I was young, I was in my 20s," Totenberg responded. "I don't want to have to go back and talk about something that happened 20 years ago." Moore said that sounded like Ginsburg talking. Not true, said Totenberg, since Ginsburg was in his 30s when he was a dope fiend law professor.

Moore's Weekly costs \$24 a year and is available from P.O. Box 18135, Washington, DC 20005.

WHY ARE OUR TROOPS KILLING PALESTINIAN KIDS ON THE WEST BANK?



OUR SOLDIERS ARE DEFENDING THEMSELVES AGAINST ROCK-THROWING MOBS



BUT THESE ARE SCHOOL CHILDREN! THEY AREN'T PLO GUERRILLAS!



AND THEY WON'T BE



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Sartre: A Life

By Ronald Hayman
Simon & Schuster, 572 pp., \$22.95

Sartre: A Life

By Annie Cohen-Solal
Pantheon, 591 pp., \$24.95

By Rick Wilson

Two versions of how Sartre imitates life



Jean-Paul Sartre: Being and nothingness and big biographies.

N IETZSCHE ONCE WROTE THAT "It is not the strength but the duration of great sentiments that makes great men." If Nietzsche was right, then Jean-Paul Sartre had all the qualifications of greatness. At the age of 70, nearly blind and barely able to walk, the spokesman for committed literature reaffirmed the path of his life: "I tell myself that the only thing to do is to point out, emphasize, and support with all one's strength whatever aspects of a particular political and social situation can produce a society of free men.... Nothing can guarantee success for us, nor can anything rationally convince us that failure is inevitable."

As one of the most influential intellectuals of our time, Sartre may have been often wrong and sometimes less than honest, but he fought his era with an unequalled tenacity. Indeed, Ronald Hayman, author of one of two recent biographies that have had the misfortune of being published almost simultaneously (with the same title), maintains that "more courageously, more stubbornly, more cleverly and more passionately than anyone else, he used his life to test ways of facing up to the evils of contemporary history."

Now there are biographies and biographies. In many of these—Sartre's own of Flaubert and Baudelaire, for example—the concerns of the author eclipse and project themselves into the subject. Both Hayman's effort and the work of Annie Cohen-Solal have avoided this trap. Of the two, the latter is perhaps the most definitive in terms of his personal life. Cohen-Solal, an Algerian literature teacher who has previously published a study of Sartre's close friend Paul Nizan, spent three years conducting research and interviews. The end result is that, as much as possible, we are given Sartre himself, change by change, and almost day by day. We are shown the unlovely Sartre in his youth and pitiable decline, his broken friendships, his tangled affairs, the complexities of his relationship with Simone de Beauvoir, his abuse of drugs, his impossible commitments, even his lifelong fear of shellfish. More than anything else, she sees Sartre as one who truly lived his philosophy, continually attempting to "create himself through his own actions."

Ronald Hayman, on the other hand, who has previously written biographies of Kafka and Nietzsche, places a much greater emphasis upon Sartre's works. This difference in points of view is due in part to the fact that Cohen-Solal wrote in

France where Sartre's work is well known, even commonplace. In the English-speaking world, people tend to think of Sartre in terms of a part of his work, i.e., as a playwright, an existentialist, a radical, a novelist. Hayman attempts to provide insights into the body of his output—no easy task, since Sartre often wrote as much as 20 pages a day.

The fame game: The most extraordinary thing to account for in his life is precisely how this provincial schoolteacher and novelist managed to rocket himself into such prominence. Though he longed for fame when growing up in the household of his grandfather Charles Schweitzer (Sartre was Albert's cousin), he was surprised and less than pleased when it finally came in postwar France.

His father had died in Jean-Paul's infancy. Precocious and introverted, Jean-Paul began writing almost as soon as he could read. Charles was tolerant of his talents but advised the boy that an author must support himself by a mundane career such as teaching.

As if his grandfather's advice was destiny, he became a teacher of philosophy, distinguished only by his non-professional manner. Attracted by Husserl's phenomenology, he took a year's leave to study philosophy in Germany, where he had his first brush with Nazism in

1933. His literary and philosophical interests complemented each other. By 1938 the novel *Nausea*, which he regarded as his finest purely literary work, was published to favorable reviews and he was laying the groundwork for existentialism.

Existentialism in vogue: It was World War II, however, that prepared the world for Sartre and Sartre for

Perhaps more than anyone else, Jean-Paul Sartre used his life and work to test ways of facing up to the evils of contemporary history.

the world. As a soldier, a prisoner of war and a resister in occupied France, he learned to move beyond the amplified individualism of his earliest works. The war years saw the completion of *Being and Nothingness*, the magnum opus of existentialism, and the performance of the anti-Nazi play *The Flies* and the powerful one-act *No Exit*. His ideas had struck a responsive chord.

Under the Occupation people had discovered the lonely power of their

conscious choices. Could one collaborate? Could one resist, even though innocent civilians would die in reprisal? Could one refrain from choosing? And, more to the point, Sartre's insistence that people could—and must—create themselves freely in an indeterminate future offered a kind of stark hope. By 1945 he was a public figure and existentialism was in vogue.

Though his political sympathies were on the left, he never attempted

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to join the Communist Party (he would have been refused had he tried). The Party, however, lost no time in condemning existentialism as reactionary petit bourgeois individualism. At the time Marx's own writings on the human individual were largely unknown, and Communists, like Hungarian Georg Lukacs in *History and Class Consciousness*, who dealt with subjectivity were severely criticized. Sartre sided with the working class, "an enormous sombre group which lived Marxism," but he had not yet confronted Marxist theory. During the late '40s he sought, in vain, for a democratic socialist third force between Stalinism and capitalism. The evaporation of those hopes and the heightening of international tensions gave him a "new and definitive apprenticeship to realism."

Pearls, swine, et al: That period was an acid test for those on the left. Many who had worshipped Stalin as a father/god figure in the '30s were shocked by the revelation of Stalinist atrocities into capitulation or silence. Sartre had never been a Stalinist, and he saw a greater and more lasting danger in right-wing reaction. Under the influence of Merleau-Ponty, a co-editor of the journal *Le Temps Modernes*, he moved closer to Marxism, a movement that culminated with his 1952 "conversion" experience. He would later write, "The last connections were broken, my vision was transformed: an anti-Communist is a swine.... I swore against the bourgeoisie a hatred which will die only when I do." It was, an oath that he would keep.

Though he became disillusioned with the Soviets after the invasion of Hungary in 1956, he was more convinced than ever of the validity of Marxism. He was led back to re-examine and attempt to revitalize Marxist theory. The results of this investigation were *Search for a Method* and the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960). Although he wrote much of the *Critique* while under the influence of drugs (a small consolation to those who have waded through it), it is arguably his most important philosophical work. He takes his place with a handful of 20th-century thinkers (Lukacs, Korsch, Gramsci, the Critical Theorists) who have dealt creatively with

Marxism. He may be tilting at windmills in trying to find in history a single meaning, but his treatment of praxis, alienation, scarcity, the practice-inert (the residue of past praxis) and the dialectic of individual and group point in directions that have yet to be sufficiently explored.

In trouble, out of jail: Sartre's return to philosophy did not imply a neglect of political activity. His strong support for the Algerian revolution against the French colonialism led to many threats on his life. DeGaulle, however, did not press for his legal prosecution on the grounds that "You don't arrest Voltaire." Sartre opposed American involvement in Vietnam as vigorously as he opposed the French, serving on the Russell Tribunal against American war crimes in Indochina. He supported the Prague Spring in 1968 and was profoundly influenced by the French student and worker rebellions, his closest brush with revolution. Hayman points out that the influence was mutual, since many of the militants of 1968 "absorbed Marxism through a Sartrean filter."

The attempt to keep the spirit of the rebellion alive led Sartre to another unfortunate involvement, this time with French Maoists. He allowed his name to be listed as the editor of some Maoist publications and defended the morality of revolutionary violence. Moving from left to ultra-left, he announced in 1977 that he was no longer a Marxist. Far from being a recantation, he aimed to take up its valid points—the class struggle, surplus value, etc.—and go beyond it. Beginning his career as an apolitical anarchist, he finished it as a social anarchist who spoke of eliminating all hierarchies, all powers.

Though his spirit was willing, the flesh was weak. His world gradually closed in. In mid-April of 1980, after final farewell to de Beauvoir, he lapsed into a coma and died. Some 50,000 people joined his funeral procession.

Hayman shows that at the heart of Sartre's activity was a conflict between literature and commitment, an example of which is his refusal to accept the Nobel prize for literature in 1964. He was happiest when writing philosophy in his study or a cafe, but more at peace with himself when crusading against the evils of the world. He could not possibly have reconciled the two. It is in this failure, however, that Hayman believes his greatness rests. "...There is something heroic in Sartre's indomitable persistence, in his boundless willingness to be wrong." An extremist by nature, Sartre made a career of expanding the boundaries of thought. Even if we can't be Sartreans, we cannot help learning from him, and Hayman's biography is a good place to start. ■

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