As Sontag is well aware, mainstream anti-Communism is not really concerned with promoting liberty. Far from it. Rather, it has been a pretext for suppressing liberty at home through loyalty investigations, political purges, surveillance and dirty tricks, and for doing worse abroad through the bombardment of Vietnam and Cambodia, the “destabilization” of Chile and the arming of murderers in El Salvador. The atrocities committed by anti-Communists do not mitigate in the slightest the evil of Communism. Nor do they excuse those among us who have been apologists for Communist oppression. But they do explain the reluctance of many on the left to shout “me too” when mainstream anti-Communists proclaim the evils of godless Communism.

The tragedy, of course, is that because mainstream anti-Communism is not really concerned with promoting liberty, it reacts tepidly to such assaults on liberty as the Jaruzelski regime’s attempt to crush the freedom movement in Poland. Some mainstream anti-Communists may even be pleased that Communism has revealed its repressive character in Poland, since this exposes the hypocrisy of Communist denunciations of U.S. actions in El Salvador. By the same token, one guesses that General Jaruzelski and his friends in the Kremlin are glad that the United States is so compromised in El Salvador that it lacks the credibility to rally world opinion against martial law in Poland.

I applaud Sontag’s effort to recapture anti-Communism from Reagan, Haig and Thatcher. As she knows very well, of course, this has been tried by others without notable success. Even so, the stakes are high enough to make it worth another try.

DANIEL SINGER

I had crossed the ocean for nothing. Here I was back in Paris five years earlier, listening to the recantations, rhetoric and crude oversimplifications of the new philosophers. There was, however, a difference. The Parisian Columbuses discovering the gulag in the 1970s were unknowns requiring Madison Avenue methods to get into the limelight. Susan Sontag needs nothing of the kind to capture attention. But the following notes are not about Sontag the writer and critic, merely about the strange, or maybe not so strange, speaker with whom I shared a platform at the Solidarity meeting at Town Hall in New York City.

As a good nouvelle philosophé, Sontag used the tactics of collective guilt. We had turned a blind eye to Soviet inhumanity, she argued, addressing an audience of which part was too young to be accused of such sins, while another part had spent a great deal of its energy denouncing Soviet crimes in the name of socialism. Being myself the son of a zek, I gained no merit from knowing about Russia’s concentration-camp universe. I am in the more comfortable position of assuring Sontag that the problem of fellow travelers is not as simple as it is now being painted by ex-Stalinists converted to the capitalist creed; assuring her too that it was most difficult for a socialist to remain critical and unattached during the years of the cold war. Today, fortunately, it is easier to proclaim a plague on both their houses, though she may no longer be interested. Having discovered the root of all evil in “Communism,” she has, I fear, chosen her side.

In any case, she has assimilated the peculiar logic of Parisian turncoats. Because we were stupid, we are wise; because we were blind, we are seers; because twenty-seven years earlier she did not take the book of Czeslaw Milosz earnestly, Sontag is now entitled to preach about Poland and the nature of Communism. Not even a decent interval of modest silence? Converted sinners tend to show too much zeal. Her Parisian predecessors had chanted “Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, Mao and Lin Piao,” and then, just reversing the order and arguing in equally primitive fashion, the presented Marx as the founder of the gulag. Sontag has improved the device. Her whole speech was designed to hammer home the unexplained and unqualified message: “Communism is successful fascism.”

Thus Brezhnev, Jaruzelski, Reagan and Sontag agree on at least one point, namely, that what is being built in the countries of “really existing socialism” is called Communism. They apparently also agree that there can be no other Communism than that. Sontag made it plain that she was not only referring to Stalinism old and new. Her other catchy definition, “fasism with a human face,” was obviously meant for stubborn suckers like myself who refuse to swallow the cheap, fashionable equation between Marx and the barbed wire.

Yet let us be serious for a moment. Susan Sontag, as far as I know, does not come from a working-class family. If on getting involved in politics, she chose the left rather than the right, it was, I suppose, because like so many of us, she had certain aspirations toward equality and social justice. She, too, must have dreamed of a classless society of equal distribution of immediate producers taking their destiny into their own hands, of the vanishing division of labor and the withering state. I did not hear the faintest echo of such preoccupation in her speech, and this was not because she was improvising in a fit of indignation over Poland. Hers was a carefully worded statement. Indeed, I was taken in by her adroit introduction and naively applauded as she claimed to be glad to speak at a meeting so different from Reagan’s show. The meeting was different, but her speech was not. If I recollected it correctly, what followed the introduction could easily be printed in, say, Commentary. As she recited her written text, the title of an essay kept running through my mind: “Heretics and Renegades.” Heretics, I still think, are the salt of the earth.

ANDREW KOPKIND

I hope I’m not naming names or giving hostile witness when I recall the day Susan Sontag and I huddled in a Cor

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munist/fascist air-raid shelter and waited for Freedom’s fighters to pass out of danger overhead. Actually, they were Freedom’s bombers—B-52s, or some such U.S. Air Force weapons system—and the bunker in which we hunkered was behind the Thong Nhat (Reunification) Hotel in downtown Hanoi. It was a few months after Tet, 1968, and as I remember it now, a good time, bad time, scoundrel time.

We had a busy schedule in war-torn North Vietnam, surveying the wreckage our country had caused, mingling with the populace and—Sontag’s special assignment—interviewing American P.O.W.s. Two fragments of the conversations she and I had in all those weeks stand out in my memory. In the first, we marveled at the exhilarating spirit of common struggle and collective good we encountered among the Vietnamese people. In the second, we quoted to each other a Tailleyrand line that Bertolucci had used as an epigraph for his film Before the Revolution: “Those who did not live before the revolution can never know the sweetness of life.” Sontag made mention of both those exchanges in her essay “Trip to Hanoi.”

Surely a long parade of ironies has marched past us all since those days, but I hadn’t realized how distracting it has been until I read the speech Sontag made at the Solidarity meeting. Between the Thong Nhat and Town Hall she seems to have forgotten that politics is history, not philosophy; that revolutions are responses to reality, not to theory; that the nature of all things is contradiction, not equilibrium. North Vietnam was, and is, a Communist state—proceeding (dialectically, dare I say the word?) in its development according to the forces and furies of the real world. Then, that society may have expressed more truth and justice (polarities Sontag proposes) than now, but perhaps less than it will in the future. And what about the truth and justice in Lyndon Johnson’s democracy?

Yes, and no. The point is that it makes little sense to me to stop time and freeze place if there is still a vision of a human face. Sontag and I had a vision of a human visage thirteen years ago, and I knew then who the scoundrels were, and who the heroes.

DAVID HOLLINGER

“I stretched out with an ice pack on my forehead when I heard that Susan Sontag had said we must tell the truth about the Communists. It was all over, then: the exciting life so long led by left-of-center intellectuals, we happy frauds. We’d have to go straight now. You know, pious homilies, a subscription to the Reader’s Digest and an open confession of guilt.”

This little fiction is an attempt to imagine what it might be like to take Susan Sontag seriously. I cannot carry the effort any further, because the issues that most animate Sontag are, to me, remote. Somehow, I had the impression that a critical attitude toward Communism had been “in” for some time, and that it was no longer necessary to affect a

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