Here we have, in undiluted form, the political mentality that characterizes the place where Reader's Digest wisdom and the Russian émigré celebrities (but not Medvedev and Sakharov) converge, and that Sontag lauds at the expense of The Nation.

With our moral sensibilities fully absorbed by the overriding issue of “utter villainy,” it must seem slothful if not sinful to attend to mere “relative” villainy. Joseph Brodsky (he of “banks and tanks”) warns us to forego our concern over American intervention in El Salvador—obviously a venue of mere second-rate villainy. And we remember all too well the saintly Solzhenitsyn’s fervent encouragement to America in Vietnam—Solzhenitsyn the orchestra leader of the “utter villainy” theme, who sponsors rather a return to czarist theocracy.

At this late date we should not need Sontag to further enlighten us on the horrors of Stalinism or on the frequent absence of humanitarian motives in Russian activities at home and abroad. But what we do desperately require in a time of mounting hysteria and war drums is to resist the barbarous assault or valid historical discrimination and political judgment that she so cavalierly commends.

Before succumbing to the Reaganite mentality of the Reader’s Digest and Alexander Haig, we might at least consider that Auschwitz and Dachau were the triumph, the fulfillment, of Mein Kampf, whereas the gulag and December 13 are the unspeakable, if all too common, travesties of the Communist Manifesto. And if Rosa Luxemburg, Antonio Gramsci and even Hannah Arendt are not sufficiently persuasive to Sontag—now no doubt happily entranced by “Life in These United States”—she might spend some time reading the recent debates and condemnatory resolutions of the Italian and Spanish Communist parties regarding the military seizure of Poland. I, for one, should hate to see Sontag, long one of the most valued assets of the American left, allow herself to become caricatured as Norman Podhoretz with a human face.

**CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS**

I was at the meeting, and I have spent ten years working for the New Statesman and The Nation. I was pleased that Susan Sontag invited the left to criticize its own record on Stalinism, and I see no sign that she has moved noticeably toward the Manichaean anti-Communism of the bad old days.

The Polish workers movement is a cause in its own right. It should be supported without any threat-clearing about El Salvador. We do not have to prove that we are not reactionaries—it was never demanded of Walesa that he denounce Pinochet (though it would have been nice if he had). Surely I am not the only socialist who finds comparisons between Solidarity and the fate of PATCO to be grotesque? The rights of highly paid Reaganite air controllers may have been violated, but the rights of Polish coal miners and shipbuilders have been abolished. It is, really, casuistry to mention them in the same breath.

Having tried to open a debate on the responsibilities of

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The Nation.

the left, Sontag has done her best to close it again by ill-tempered and ahistorical remarks about fascism and the record of the Reader’s Digest. (Actually, if the Bolsheviks had not won the civil war, the word for fascism would be a Russian one and not an Italian one.) Let us be charitable and assume that she was trying to galvanize an audience by deliberate exaggeration. Aren’t there some people who wish that what she said was even more untrue than it is? Are there not “intellectuals” who condemn Stalinism for the sake of symmetry, or because it embarrases the left and encourages the right, rather than because it is a deadly foe of socialism and democracy?

Actually, the real *trahison* in the Polish affair has come from the liberals, not from the left. It is the George Kennans, hostile to socialism as an idea, who have found the excuses of Realpolitik for Soviet conduct. But on the left, too, there are some who divert an argument about Polish self-determination into an argument about the hypocrisy of Reagan and Haig. By doing so, they devalue solidarity with Solidarity, and I think Sontag was right to say so.

**Reply**

**SUSAN SONTAG**

The speech I gave at Town Hall has now flushed out a fascinating array of responses. Furious to find that the dreadful Soho News printed a taped—and cut—version of my speech (after I’d refused to give them the text and told them I was publishing it elsewhere), I am glad to be printed in *The Nation*. In their introduction, the editors write as if *The Nation* chose me, but it is also I who chose to have my speech in *The Nation*. Even Arnye Neier cannot forbear sanctimoniously pointing out that he has expressed anti-Communist views in *The Nation* but would not care to have them appear in the Reader’s Digest. Well, does he imagine that I feel differently?

Most of the respondents say that the issue I have raised is not a problem, or that it is a problem already dealt with. I think it is a problem, and take as further evidence of that the anger I have aroused, and the low quality of all but two of the responses. Singer complains that he has crossed the ocean for nothing and belabors me, in true *apparatchik* fashion, with the suspicion that I may not be of working-class origin. Hollinger, stretched out with an ice pack on his forehead, calls it much ado about nothing. Andrew Kopkind, the noted disco expert of the 1970s, reminisces about our good old days in Hanoi in 1968, and observes that truth and justice proceed “dialectically.” Diana Trilling welcomes me to the ranks of her anti-Communists (thanks, but no thanks), and quarrels with me because I do not find Reagan “sincere.” While most of my respondents profess to find banal homilies or a defection to reaction (plus a subscription to the Reader’s Digest) in my plea for intellectual honesty, she finds “the weary rhetoric of Communist invective.” (Trilling’s response is the most mind-boggling of all.) The responses of Arnye Neier and Christopher Hitch-
ens are the only ones that I can take seriously, and I thank them for their courteous and thoughtful comment.

Daniel Singer, David Hollinger, Philip Green and Philip Pochoda insist on their "good" Communism. But the necessity of liberation struggles and the virtues of the Italian Communist Party are strictly irrelevant to what I was saying. (When I talk politics with friends in Italy who are in the party, I usually find myself in large agreement with them. They talk like social democrats; so do—am—I.) My argument is about countries in which a Communist—that is, a Leninist—party has taken power and rules. The fact that every one of these countries is a tyranny that oppresses workers and corrupts intellectual life and free inquiry seems not to have led Singer, Green, Hollinger and Pochoda to draw any conclusions about Communism as a system. It has me.

I do not find it any evidence of the virtues of the Communist tyrannies of Eastern Europe that they inspire heroic, unsuccessful revolts (1956, 1968, 1980-81). Unlike Green, I believe that "the violent suppression of organized labor" is not a feature that distinguishes the regimes, of say, Argentina and Chile from those of, say, Eastern Europe, but is, rather, a perfect description of what goes on, more intelligently, more systematically, in Communist countries. Neither the ruling elites nor the enslaved and disaffected people of Eastern Europe can be called "Marxist"; and if and when these oppressed manage to overthrow their tyrants, it will not, I fear, be to embrace an alternative of our liking. What is brewing in Eastern Europe is not democratic socialism. The centrality of a particularly fervent Catholicism to Solidarity is not an accident or an instance of cultural lag; and, in Russia, among those who are not cynics or merely demoralized, new converts to religious fundamentalism outnumber the liberals and democratic socialists a thousand to one. Green does not understand the corrupting effects of decades of Communist despotism, and of Communism's ideological bankruptcy. He asks—only rhetorically, alas: Is it now proved that we have been wrong to be hopeful that out of Communism something much better might emerge? Yes, it is now proved. We were wrong. It is the people who live in those countries who tell us that.

Wonderful to hear, each of my respondents claims to have never been deceived by the nature of Communist tyranny. Indeed, most claim that they were always anti-Communists. But I could say the same. I was never a Communist (and therefore am not now a "repentant" ex-Communist of the god-who-failed variety) nor a Trotskyist or Maoist. Neier points out that he thought Milosz was telling the truth in the early 1950s. But I hardly thought Milosz was lying. Nevertheless, detesting the reactionary uses to which anti-Communism is put—that is, for the very reasons Neier mentions in the next paragraph of his response—I bracketed what Milosz and the other émigrés were saying. That is the phenomenon I was addressing. I was always—virtuous label—an "anti-Stalinist." But, like many people on the democratic left, I did not understand the essentially despotic nature of the Communist system (that is, a country—any country—ruled by a Leninist party). One of my points is that the word "Stalinist" is, finally, irrelevant to the discussion of Communism. Whoever limits the iniquities of Communism to Stalinism or finds hope in the "hypocrisies" of Communist leaders (who betray their "ideals"??) has really missed the point.

The response typified by Singer, Pochoda, Hollinger and Green expresses exactly the attitude I am attacking. I find it dishonest, demagogic, untrue, deeply complicitous with tyranny and, last but hardly least, not in the interests of the democratic left. Singer is perhaps the easiest to deciper. He is the man who, at the Town Hall rally, declared that although he wishes that Solidarity members had adopted the "International" as their anthem, he understands why they did not; unfortunately, it happens to be the anthem of the oppressive state, the state-which-pretends-to-be-Communist. I do not wish the members of Solidarity had sung the "International." I do not think that they were mistaken in not doing so. Neither do I wish to hear it sung by the democratic movement in El Salvador, whose struggle to overthrow the tyranny backed by the American government I passionately support.

**SALVADORAN ELECTIONS**

**Ballots Won't Stop the Bullets**

CYNTHIA BROWN

One thing can be said with certainty about the elections scheduled for March 28 in El Salvador: they will end neither the fighting nor the economic chaos which has brought three of every four Salvadorans to near starvation. Nonetheless, they present an opportunity for taking stock of El Salvador's progress in dealing with its national crisis.

Though the United States has consistently backed the elections, Ambassador Deane Hinton has admitted that the war will continue regardless of their outcome. U.S. and Salvadoran opposition sources agree that neither side can at present win a military victory. The guerrillas of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (F.M.L.N.) are unlikely to be routed by the recently released $55 million in additional U.S. military aid. The F.M.L.N.'s "zones of control" now cover approximately one quarter of the nation's territory and have been extended to ten of El Salvador's fourteen provinces. The insurgents showed they are capable of striking at military bases when they destroyed five or six helicopters—half the fleet—at Ilopango Air Force Base in San Salvador on January 27, and they showed they can temporarily threaten even an important military garrison, as they did in San Sebastián last week.

On the other hand, the State Department is now suggesting that military victory may be the only acceptable...

*Cynthia Brown writes frequently for The Nation on Latin American issues.*
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