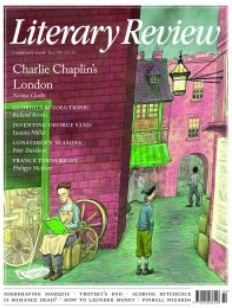

RUPERT CHRISTIANSEN

Shelter from the Storm

Hotel Exile: Paris in the Shadow of War

By Jane Rogoyska

Allen Lane 368pp £25

Still the sole *grand luxe* hotel gracing Paris's Left Bank, the Lutetia opened in 1910 on the Boulevard Raspail. A gaudy showpiece of Art Nouveau splendour, it aimed to attract customers of the neighbouring department store Le Bon Marché, whose owners built it. Throughout the Jazz Age, its bars and restaurant were also patronised by the fashionable intelligentsia – Gide, Joyce, Hemingway, Picasso and Matisse among them – but its first flush of glamour gradually faded.

As owners came and went after the Second World War, the hotel sank into shabby gentility, a decline arrested when it was revamped and rebranded as part of the globalised Mandarin Oriental 'collection' a decade ago. A night in one of its lavishly furnished suites can now empty you of as much as €6,000 but might leave a rather soulless impression. The building's darker history, explored in this new study by Jane Rogoyska, has been almost erased, visibly acknowledged only on a modest plaque on an exterior wall, easily ignored by its heedlessly wealthy clientele.

Rogoyska starts by reminding us that a certain mystique hovers around all hotels: offering temporary welcome and shelter, as well as anonymity and locked doors, they are liminal places where no questions are asked and no judgements made. At the Lutetia, these qualities would come into sharp focus through the Nazi era, 1933–45, initially as it became a hub to which an elite of Jewish and political refugees were drawn after Hitler came to power. Here was housed what became known as the Lutetia Circle, ineffectually led by Thomas Mann's brother Heinrich. Meetings debated the possibility of establishing a new constitution for Germany in the wake of Hitler's putative downfall, naively regarded as imminent. The circle's petitions, manifestos, speeches and appeals amounted to very little, not least because of the bitter schisms between its social democrats and communists, exacerbated by the Moscow trials and the Spanish Civil War.

On the German invasion of France in 1940, Brigadier-General Charles de Gaulle based himself in the hotel – in which he had spent his honeymoon twenty years previously – as he vainly attempted to dissuade Reynaud's government from an armistice. When he fled to Britain, he left his luggage in the

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Lutetia's basement, recovering it intact four years later. A hastily constructed false wall would similarly protect the best of the wines.

All the major hotels were requisitioned by Nazi agencies: the Lutetia was assigned to the Abwehr, the intelligence wing of the Wehrmacht. Rogoyska provides a hauntingly vivid account of the hotel's imperturbable routine – 'cleaning, polishing, laying out the breakfast plates' – as the enemy's bureaucracy took control. No jackboots, no gunfire or panic, just the hotel director Marcel Chappaz 'greeting a German officer with the formal politeness with which he greets every guest'.

Colonel Oscar Reile was put in resident charge. A French speaker, he was not a fanatic Nazi so much as a diligent professional patriot concerned primarily with establishing an effective espionage network, according to a rule book that Hitler would soon tear up. As the Lutetia's staff calmly continued to provide the enemy with five-star service, Reile insisted on a veneer of normality as he and his colleagues took advantage of the excellent cuisine and cellar. Less savoury was the complicity in a 'bureau' set up in the hotel and licensed to finance the Abwehr's operations by grabbing, grafting or purloining from the French anything of value.

After 1941 and the 'Nacht und Nebel' edict that allowed anyone to be arrested or eliminated without warrant or consequence, things got much nastier. Adept at recruiting double agents, Reile may have preferred persuasion to torture, but the reach of his office was diminished as that of the lawless Gestapo increased. Reile realised for a long time that the game was up for Germany as well as the Abwehr. In August 1944, as the liberating Allies approached, he drank a last bottle of the Lutetia's champagne before the Nazis abandoned the hotel. The staff 'tried to stop ourselves laughing'.

The Lutetia was now requisitioned again, this time as a reception centre for returning prisoners and refugees. Crowds waited anxiously outside the hotel to read the billboards posting names of the arrivals – as many as five hundred a day – and a harrowing picture emerges of busloads of skeletal and diseased inmates of Buchenwald being sprayed with DDT to kill infestations of lice. But the hotel was a kindly and healing place, run by a voluntary committee of three heroic women. For traumatised victims of Nazism, it was at the Lutetia that 'faith in humanity began slowly to reassert itself'.

Rogoyska bulks her book up with snapshots of the lives and fates of those who came into the Lutetia's orbit. Personalities range from the profoundly repellent collaborator Robert Alesch, a priest who infiltrated the Resistance and betrayed hundreds, to Samuel Beckett, a beacon of moral integrity, and Irène Némirovsky, arrested in front of her daughters and transported to Auschwitz. The Lutetia often vanishes from the reader's view amid these incidental sagas, but Rogoyska proves such a fresh, astute and unaffected writer that there's not a dull page, so vividly is the drama of it all communicated.

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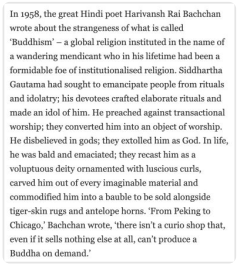
In 1958, the great Hindi poet Harivansh Rai Bachchan wrote about the strangeness of what is called 'Buddhism' – a global religion instituted in the name of a wandering mendicant who in his lifetime had been a formidable foe of institutionalised religion. Siddhartha Gautama had sought to emancipate people from rituals and idolatry; his devotees crafted elaborate rituals and made an idol of him. He preached against transactional worship; they converted him into an object of worship. He disbelieved in gods; they extolled him as God. In life, he was bald and emaciated; they recast him as a voluptuous deity ornamented with luscious curls, carved him out of every imaginable material and commodified him into a bauble to be sold alongside tiger-skin rugs and antelope horns. 'From Peking to Chicago,' Bachchan wrote, 'there isn't a curio shop that, even if it sells nothing else at all, can't produce a Buddha on demand.'

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