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## Tales of a Parisian hotel

**Ariane Banks**

19 March 2026, The Tablet

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Hotel Lutetia in its pomp

ALAMY/PWB IMAGES, CHARLES LANSIAUX

## Exile: Paris in the Shadow of War

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As Lyse Doucet has shown in *The Finest Hotel in Kabul*, hotels are rich repositories of stories, blank slates on which the history of an era can be etched. In a great hotel, the staff are imperturbable, often invisible, allowing guests to act out their lives and their fantasies with utmost discretion, provided their bills are paid.

Hotel Lutetia in Paris, the only really grand hotel on the Left Bank, was one such: the neutral stage on which prominent pre-war German exiles, German wartime intelligence and, ironically, surviving victims of the Nazi camps duly took their turn. Throughout, the cellars were fully stocked, the maids whisked around their daily duties and the maitre d' surveyed his changing clientele with barely a raised eyebrow, his private views kept firmly to himself.

The Lutetia was opened in 1910 to vie with the George V, the Crillon and the Ritz on the Right Bank. It was an ocean liner of a hotel, with crystal chandeliers, parquet floors, mosaics and 200 bedrooms. From the off, it attracted politicians and writers: Charles de Gaulle chose it for the first night of his honeymoon, James Joyce and André Gide ate there regularly and Hemingway drank in the basement bar. In 1935, however, a new clientele stumbled over the threshold, one far too impoverished to stay or even eat there: refugees and intellectuals from the Third Reich such as Walter Benjamin, Heinrich Mann, Arthur Koestler; also Gisèle Freund, Manès Sperber, Willi Münzenberg. The latter's mission was to gather together Hitler's scattered opponents in a German Popular Front, and where better to convene than the Lutetia?

All political divisions would be subsumed by their anti-Fascist unity; they saw it as their last chance to fight back.

Rogoyska introduces us to these players and many more, and grippingly evokes the tension of the times: the exiles' abject poverty a reproach to the luxuries of the Lutetia, the constant fear of betrayal or infiltration – for the Gestapo are everywhere, and poverty can break a man's will. She follows them as war breaks out and the noose tightens: flight for some, capture for others, deportation, escape, concealment. Back at the Lutetia, an occupation: Admiral Canaris chooses it as HQ for the Abwehr, the German military intelligence service, and takes a keen interest in its restaurant and wine cellar. It becomes a fortress echoing to the buzz of radio transmitters and the clack of typewriters, staff swarming its corridors and officers lounging in its saloons. High-ranking Nazis dine high on the hog, while occupied Paris starves and Nazi intelligence tightens its grip on Europe.

In 1945, an even starker transformation: from wartime seat of power and influence, the Lutetia becomes a reception centre for deportees returning from the camps, wafer-thin, haunted by terrors, swarming with lice. A puff of DDT and a hot bath was their welcome, then the long, slow piecing back together of their lives, the desperate search for family and friends. Transformed from hotel to hospital, the Lutetia sailed impassively on, and the dramas it witnessed are brought here to vivid, searing life.