

COUNTRY: GBR
TYPE: Print
AVE: £2193.25
REACH: 28159

AUTHOR: Ben Hutchinson
PAGE: 4,5
SURFACE: 106.00 %

> 15 May 2026 at 0:00

They'll always have Paris

The Hôtel Lutetia in war and peace

Ben Hutchinson

Jane Rogoyska

Hotel Exile
Paris in the shadow of war
356pp. Allen Lane. £25.

Uwe Neumahr

Die Buchhandlung der Exilanten
Paris 1940, Zuflucht und Widerstand
320pp. C. H. Beck. €26.

In the preface to his *Theory of the Novel* (1962), Georg Lukács famously excoriated those postwar German intellectuals who had “taken up residence in the “Grand Hotel Abyss”, which he described as a “beautiful hotel, equipped

with every comfort, on the edge of an abyss, of nothingness, of absurdity”. If one were to search for a physical representation of this metaphysical location, it would be hard to find a better candidate than the grand Hôtel Lutetia. Opened in 1910 as a pendant to Le Bon Marché, the pioneering Parisian department store immortalized in Emile Zola’s novel *Au Bonheur des dames* (1883), the Lutetia has reigned over Boulevard Raspail for more than 100 years, an icon of the Left Bank. As a metonym for the Paris of the Occupation, however, it is indelibly associated with the 1940s, when it was by turns the headquarters of German intelligence and the leading assembly point for survivors of the camps. First the Lutetia looked into the abyss; then the abyss looked into the Lutetia.

Jane Rogoyska’s eloquent history brings this period vividly to life, in part through the simple trick of narrating the story in the present tense. Divided into sections describing the years “before”, “during” and “after” the war, *Hotel Exile* follows the Lutetia’s evolution over the twelve years of the Third Reich. In the 1930s, it was part of the broader ecology of anti-fascism, a meeting point for intellectuals in exile. By 1935, it was hosting what became known as “the Lutetia Committee”, a gathering of left-wing thinkers and writers that would become the German Popular Front. Chairied by the ubiquitous but ageing Heinrich Mann, the committee faced the thankless task of trying to unite the fragile egos and petty resentments of what

was left of Germany’s political opposition. That they would fail was inevitable for psychological as well as political reasons.

The author is good, in this opening section, at evoking the fractious atmosphere of exile. In the south of France, Mann’s fellow intellectuals pass their time “reading from their works, taking tea, drinking wine, and bitching about each other”; in Paris, the pressures are that much greater, with the majority of time and energy consumed by the simple struggle for survival. Most exiles – Anna Seghers, Walter Benjamin, Gisèle Freund, Arthur Koestler – do not have Mann’s status or money. They pass their days sitting in cheap cafés, keeping warm in libraries, playing chess. (Benjamin, it turns out, is a bad loser.) Above all, of

COUNTRY: GBR
 TYPE: Print
 AVE: £2193.25
 REACH: 28159

AUTHOR: Ben Hutchinson
 PAGE: 4,5
 SURFACE: 106.00 %

> 15 May 2026 at 0:00

course, they write, desperately, as though they could forestall catastrophe through sheer willpower. "In my hotel the typewriters crackle", notes the poet and critic Hans Sahl. "Writers at work. They are trying to give meaning to time."

By the time the focus moves into the hotel, the game already feels lost. The young Willy Brandt, meeting Mann in 1938, has the impression that the famous old writer is being used as a puppet by Moscow; by September 1938, the German Popular Front is officially dissolved in a final meeting at the hotel. With the outbreak of war the following year, the Lutetia, like the rest of Paris, drifts into a strange hiatus, the *drôle de guerre* between September 1939 and May 1940. James Joyce moves into the hotel, self-indulgent as usual, often accompanied by the young Samuel Beckett. The two Irishmen sit together in silence, "both suffused with sadness. Beckett mostly for the world, Joyce for himself". At the other end of the scale, Koestler speaks for many when describing the consequences of months of unpaid rent: his squalid tenement is falling to pieces, "like rigor mortis slowly gaining one limb after another". Even the abyss requires upkeep.

With the arrival of the Germans, the narrative shifts focus, away from intellectuals and towards intelligence. The Lutetia becomes the headquarters of the German *Abwehr*, the military spies whose job it is to infiltrate the Resistance. Led by Admiral Wilhelm Canaris, an urbane, international nationalist who ends up hanged by his own side, the *Abwehr* are a strange bunch who spend almost as much time fighting turf war against the SS and Gestapo as hunting their supposed enemies. Its officers are delighted to find themselves in Paris, and in particular at the Lutetia, where they can indulge their taste for fine wine and high living, serviced by the ever-discreet hotel staff. While they take pride in remaining professional towards the occupiers, the waiters and bellboys take greater pride in tricking them, walling up the best bottles in their cellars (and even, they claim, hiding POWs there).

As the war progresses, the atmosphere turns darker. Rogoyska includes some excellent pen portraits of characters on both sides of the war, from the saintly Sabine Zlatin - who tried desperately to save Jewish children in the *Héroul* before Klaus Barbie could get to them, and ended up working at the Lutetia - to the diabolical Robert Alesch, who used his cover as a patriotic French priest to bring down numerous Resistance networks. Beckett's great friend Alfred Péron, to name just one, was deported on account of Alesch, and Beckett only survived because Péron's wife managed to warn him. Such betrayals accumulate as the numbers mount, soberly recorded by Rogoyska in eye-watering lists of victims deported from Paris - with the Lutetia at the centre of it all, the brain of the Nazi body, pulsing with reptilian menace. After four years of directing operations from Boulevard Raspail, the remaining *Abwehr* officers leave the hotel on August 18, 1944. A week later, Paris is liberated.

The real impact of this book arrives, inevitably, in its final section. Anyone who has walked past the Lutetia will have seen the plaque: "From April to August 1945,

in this hotel transformed into a reception centre, some of the survivors of the Nazi concentration camps were received ...". That "some" digs its claws in, since, as the plaque continues, "their joy could not erase the anguish and sorrow of the families of the thousands of missing people who waited in vain". Some 19,000 deportees returned to the Lutetia, perhaps a quarter of the overall total.

After such knowledge, what forgiveness? Amid the dehousing and the debriefing, the oversleeping and the overeating, those who did return struggled, understandably, to adapt. The ghosts who had come back from the dead found themselves in a new kind of exile, unable to relate to those who had remained in France. Their very existence, however welcome, was a kind of living reproach: "nobody wanted to listen to us", in the words of Simone Weil. The survivors' attempt to reassert their humanity expressed itself in small gestures in the way that the pianist Margot Rauch, who lost her daughter in the camps, but somehow returned herself, rushed to Le Bon Marché to buy herself a handbag, as a token of femininity and a place to keep her identity papers. The staff at the Lutetia - led, now, by the irrepressible Zlatin - did their best to help such ghosts adapt, but their task was an impossible one. The abyss was too big.

A short walk from the Lutetia, just the other side of Saint-Sulpice, two bookshops provided a different kind of asylum for exiles. Shakespeare and Company and La Maison des Amis des Livres were among the best-known addresses of the interwar years; their owners, Sylvia Beach and Adrienne Monnier, have passed into literary legend. Located in the heart of the sixth *arrondissement*, on Rue de l'Odéon, the two bookstores were at the centre of both French and expatriate intellectual life in the first half of the twentieth century. As Beach would later write, there should have been a tunnel under the road between them. The story is well known and the cast list familiar: Uwe Neumahr, in his history *Die Buchhandlung der Exilanten* ("The Exiles' Bookshop"), cannot avoid going over the well-trodden ground of the "lost generation", especially in his early chapters on the 1920s and 1930s. The anecdotes are nonetheless arresting, evocative to the point of caricature: Gertrude Stein declaring her genius (as well as that of Hitler); Ernest Hemingway showing off his war wounds; Joyce demanding five rounds of proofs when publishing *Ulysses*. To call Beach and Monnier long-suffering is to understate their commitment to culture.

It is in the nature of this commitment that the two booksellers are not even the stars of their own story. Neumahr's narrative necessarily gathers an ensemble cast, since that is what the bookshops did. Inevitably, there is overlap with Rogoyska's protagonists, but the emphasis is different. The charismatic young photographer Gisèle Freund, for instance, emerges as a key voice in both books. Both authors tell the story of her arrival from Frankfurt as a twenty-five-year-old student, nervously arguing her way past a suspicious guard by asking whether he had ever met a Jew called Gisela. Neumahr



French deportees repatriated from Germany at the Hôtel Lutetia, Paris, May 1945

digs deeper into her intellectual development, however, tracing her evolution from sociology student at the Frankfurt School to leading photographer of the French intellectual aristocracy, portraitist of André Malraux and friend of Benjamin. That she managed to do all this - becoming, along the way, one of the first women to defend her thesis at the Sorbonne - was thanks to the indefatigable support of Monnier, with whom she had moved in, taking Sylvia's place, in Rue de l'Odéon.

Monnier emerges as the real hero of Neumahr's story, more so even than Beach, better known though she is in the anglophone world. While Beach, as an American citizen, had to suffer the indignity of being locked in the monkey house of the Jardin d'Acclimatation, and was then sent away to be held with other Americans in Vittel, Adrienne fought tirelessly to distribute food, help foreigners and support her beloved coterie of authors, including Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer and Koestler. Neumahr's book, in its quiet way, offers a feminist rewriting of the war years, moving aside some of the tiresome male egos in favour of the more self-effacing women who kept people alive. Even after the war, Monnier continued selflessly helping, distributing food and clothes, writing about Benjamin long before his renaissance in the 1960s, and seeing her many protégés - above all, the world-famous photographer Freund - go on to illustrious careers. Neumahr even suggests that she should be considered "righteous among the Gentiles".

But Monnier is not the only hero of Neumahr's book. One of his notable achievements is to highlight, among the many celebrated authors, a number of names that are less well known to the general public. Chief among these is Henri

Hoppenot, a writer-diplomat in the grand French tradition who wrote to his mentor Paul Claudel that Monnier's bookshop was "the best of Europe". As director of the Europe section of the French Foreign Office, he was well placed to make a difference to this continent of culture; by the time he resigned in October 1942, in protest at Pétain's policies, he had intervened repeatedly to free, among others, Kracauer and Benjamin (in 1939 and in 1940). To thank him, Benjamin gave Hoppenot the first edition of St-John Perse's *Anubasis* that Rainer Maria Rilke had urged him to translate shortly before his death in 1926. Such was the world that was going under.

Rogoyska and Neumahr resuscitate this world in differing but equally compelling ways. For all their differences of emphasis - Rogoyska concentrates mostly on the occupiers and victims, Neumahr on the intellectuals - their books share a number of features that go beyond the converging cast lists and focus on the sixth *arrondissement*. They both, inevitably, rely heavily on existing scholarship, since much has been written on the Lutetia and *l'Odéon*, most notably by Laure Murat in her *Passage de l'Odéon* (2003). They both really take off as they move into their final thirds, as the Occupation begins to strangle the city and individual decisions become life-or-death. And they both, finally, achieve a kind of moral clarity that sets aside some of the bigger names in favour of small - and often, it has to be said, female - acts of succour. However familiar the story might be, we'll always have Paris in the 1940s.

Ben Hutchinson is German Editor at the TLS and Director of the University of London Institute in Paris. His books include *Lateness and Modern European Literature*, 2016.