

A comment on the life and death of Czech-French novelist Milan Kundera (1929-2023)

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The death of Czech-French novelist Milan Kundera on July 16 in Paris at the age of 94 marked the passing of an important novelist whom time had outrun.

By the time of Kundera's emigration to France in 1975 and especially his success in the West in the 1980s, pessimism, disillusionment and a rejection of the notion of historical progress were gripping intellectual and cultural circles in Europe and America, and Kundera's writings became almost the archetypal expression of this mood in literature. His irrationalism, which was also invariably anti-Communist and cynical, spoke to the reaction produced by the Thatcher-Reagan social counterrevolution, the great leap in social inequality and the rise of postmodernism on university campuses.

No doubt Kundera bore responsibility for his own art, his own development and his own mistakes. However, the greater, deeper blame for his unhappy trajectory and fate lies above all with Stalinism, "that syphilis of the working class movement," in Leon Trotsky's words. Its role was especially "criminal and injurious," Trotsky explained, because Stalinism "covers the services it renders to imperialism with the authority stolen from the October Revolution and Bolshevism." Kundera's life and work make up a case study in the devastating impact of Stalinism's work.

Kundera was the author of 10 novels, most famously *The Joke* (1967), *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1979), and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984). Kundera also published several books of essays, including *The Art of the Novel* (1986) and *The Curtain* (2005), as well as short stories (some collected in *Laughable Loves* [1974]) and several plays, notably *Jacques and His Master* (1981), whose 1983 production in Cambridge, Massachusetts was directed, accompanied by considerable media fanfare, by writer-critic Susan Sontag.

Kundera matured as a significant artist in the late 1950s and 1960s, a period of discontent in Czechoslovakia. An economic downturn caused considerable opposition in the working class to the regime of Antonín Novotný, which was forced to appease more privileged layers of the population. Novotný loosened travel restrictions in 1962 and the famed German-Czech writer Franz Kafka was officially rehabilitated as an indication of a new "openness." Czech film had already begun its progress into the "new wave" and by 1964 Milos Forman's first feature film, *Black Peter*, had appeared. Kundera was close to many of these filmmakers at the Film and TV School of the Academy of Performing Arts (FAMU) in Prague and indeed taught a number of them.

His first novel, *The Joke*, was finished in 1965 but could not be published until 1967. It is the story of a student, Ludvik, a loyal party member of the Czechoslovak Communist Party (CSK), expelled for a writing a humorous postcard to his girlfriend that ends with the phrase, "Long live Trotsky!"

The "joke," supposedly based on Kundera's own experience in 1950, earns Ludvik five years in a military penal unit, when he falls in love with a local factory worker, Lucie. He eventually becomes a scientist and the

plot of the novel centers around Ludvik's desire for revenge against those who expelled him from the party.

The book became enormously popular during the liberalizing "Prague Spring" of 1968 because it spoke to the hypocrisy and even absurdity of the Stalinist regime. Even before it was published, filmmaker Jaromil Jireš began writing a film version, which was released in 1969.

Many of the themes that would preoccupy Kundera in his subsequent fiction were already present: a distrust of history, an overblown attraction to the absurd and the irrational and a turn to private life, especially love and sex, as a refuge from the broader world. In *The Joke* he portrays his worker characters as hostile or indifferent to the regime, but essentially passive, and Ludvik's emotional tensions brought on by mistreatment and ostracism tensions tend to work themselves out in a series of unsatisfying emotional relationships. Ludvik and clearly Kundera himself do not see any sort of a solution in a social struggle to make life better.

Although the writer shuttles back and forth in the history—especially since 1948—of Czechoslovakia, there is remarkably little thought given by any of the characters to the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953, to Nikita Khrushchev's "secret speech" of 1956 that detailed many of the crimes of Stalin or, for that matter, to the Nazi occupation and the revolutionary history of Czechoslovakia itself. They are referred to but seemingly do not make an imprint on his characters. His response to the crisis of Stalinism of those years appears parochial and national.

This not to say that Kundera was unmoved by the revolutionary tide of the postwar period. Here is how he describes, from the point of view of one of the characters, a mass demonstration on the first anniversary of the 1948 takeover, when the Italian Stalinist leader, Palmiro Togliatti, appears on the podium and a group of young singers wants to express their internationalism by singing the Italian revolutionary song, *Bandiera Rossa*.

... little by little more voices broke into song, people began to realize what was going on, and the song rose up slowly out of the pandemonium in the square like a butterfly emerging from an enormous rumbling chrysalis.

But then the novel moves on to the scene of the disgraceful and stupid interrogation of Ludvik by the CSK student organization for his heretical postcard:

They said I had written my sentences on an open postcard, there for everyone to see, that my words had an objective significance that could not be explained away by the state of my emotions. Then they asked me how much Trotsky I had read. None, I said. They asked me who had lent me the books. No one, I said. They

asked me what Trotskyites I had met with. None, I said. They told me they were relieving me of my post in the Students Union, effective immediately, and asked me to give them the keys to my office.

Ludvik becomes cynical after this ordeal, and the novel clearly struck a chord in the country—in part perhaps because it does not seem that Kundera, by the end of the novel, has closed off the possibility that “socialism” as it existed could be reformed.

Opposition to the regime took on genuinely progressive forms but also, unsurprisingly, nationalist ones. The speech Kundera gave at the Fourth Congress of the Czech Writers union in June 1967 focused on questions of Czech national literature and its place in European culture, a subject he returned to throughout his life.

In *The Joke* Kundera sticks to the false and deeply disorienting conception that Stalinism is a variety of Marxism. It is possible that the writer had read some of Trotsky’s works, but in his first novel, the name of the great Russian revolutionary is merely the ultimate heresy, a provocation, not a reference to the program of world revolution carried forward by the Left Opposition and the Fourth International since 1923.

This history was largely inaccessible to Kundera and other dissident intellectuals at the time. This was not simply because of Stalinist repression and censorship, but also due to the enormous political and cultural influence of the Stalinist and Social-Democratic bureaucracies that dominated the working class and the left intelligentsia more generally, whether they were in power, as in Czechoslovakia or the USSR, or, as in France and Italy, where they constituted a pro-capitalist “oppositional” bulwark inside the working class under the conditions of the postwar boom.

There were, as well, considerable pressures placed on the Trotskyist movement itself by the emergence, after 1953, of the tendency known as Pabloism, which claimed that the Stalinist bureaucracies in the USSR and eastern Europe could be pushed to the left and reformed, as the World Socialist Web Site has documented. Pabloism carried out a wrecking operation against genuine Trotskyism in the Stalinist-run countries.

Kundera was born in Brno, Czechoslovakia in 1929, into a middle-class family, the son of prominent Czech pianist musicologist Ludvik Kundera. He spent important formative years under the German occupation. The Red Army, after defeating the Nazis and driving west, liberated Czechoslovakia in 1944 and millions of Czechs supported the prospects of socialism. Like many others of his generation, Kundera joined the Communist Party in 1947 at the age of 18 and enthusiastically greeted the Stalinist coming to power the next year.

Kundera initially studied musical composition at Charles University in Prague—his work shows an abiding love of and concern with music—but later switched to FAMU. In this period, he published translations of the Russian-Soviet poet Vladimir Mayakovsky and his own surrealist poems. He was expelled from the CSK in 1950, but graduated from FAMU, which appointed him as a lecturer in world literature. His first book of poetry, *Man: A Wide Garden*, was published in 1953.

The illusions that Kundera and many Czech workers and intellectuals had about the ability of the ruling Stalinist party to establish socialism had begun to dissipate by then. The Czech Stalinists initially had no intention of putting into place anti-capitalist measures, but sought to rule through a bourgeois regime made up of pre-war figures. This plan was upset by the aggression of American imperialism and the beginnings of the Cold War. The Stalinists ultimately took power in their own hands, with the support of wide layers of the working class, and nationalized much of the Czech economy, but implemented a police state and repressed genuine Marxism, democratic rights and artistic life in defense of their own privileges.

As the WSWS has explained, the Stalinist purges were “particularly

ferocious” in Czechoslovakia. Between 1948 and 1954,

90,000 people were persecuted for political crimes. Some 22,000 people were thrown into 107 labor camps. More than 1,000 perished in detention, and over 230 were executed. In addition to these political purges, the Stalinist government expelled millions of ethnic Germans and Hungarians on the reactionary basis of ascribing collective guilt to them for the crimes of fascism.

In the vicious, notorious November 1952 Slánský trial,

Rudolf Slánský and a number of other [Communist] party leaders were accused of sympathies for the Yugoslav leader Tito. Yet again, the bureaucracy consciously whipped up an atmosphere of toxic nationalism and anti-Semitism in order to further undermine the political consciousness of the working class. (Eleven of the 14 defendants in the trial were explicitly denounced for their Jewish origin.)

Kundera’s work of the postwar period apparently veered between Stalinist orthodoxy and genuine criticism and lyricism. He was readmitted into the CSK in 1956 in the aftermath of Khrushchev’s revelations about Stalin’s terror.

In 1957, a book of his love poems was published, *Monologues*. In 1960, Kundera’s work of literary history, *The Art of the Novel: Vladislav Vancura’s Journey to the Great Epic*, was published, a treatise about the interwar Czech avant-garde writer Vladislav Vancura, author of the 1925 expressionist antiwar novel, *Ploughshares into Swords*. Kundera’s work was influenced by the ideas of Hungarian philosopher and critic (and politically pro-Stalinist) Georg Lukacs.

One could say that Kundera’s artistically significant career was bookended by the events of 1948 and the suppression of the Prague Spring of 1968 by Soviet tanks. In this regard, his development reflected a broader trend within the global middle class intelligentsia: away from the legacy of the October Revolution, away from socialism, away from the working class. Many Czech intellectuals still considered themselves to be left-wing in 1968, but the drift to the right of dissident circles picked up steam from the mid-1970s onward.

Kundera was persecuted during the period of the post-1968 “normalization” by the Czech Stalinist authorities and was forced to emigrate to France in 1975. When *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* was published in 1979, not only were all his works banned in Czechoslovakia, but his citizenship was revoked.

While some of his novels are more ambitious and successful than others, in Kundera’s work on the whole the author pays a great deal of attention, for better or worse, to a type of authorial self-awareness, at times directly addressing the reader.

In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, for instance, the third-person narrator who tells the stories of the philandering Tomas, the artist Sabina and the other characters, is itself a detached and analytical narrative voice that occasionally elides into the voice of Kundera the author, who contributes thematic, philosophical and historical observations.

This style has been labeled “postmodernist” because of its refusal to sustain a fictional narrative. It reflects an outlook—that the narration of events is intrinsically subjective, untrustworthy or incoherent—that has influenced or directly shaped a great deal of artwork since the late 1970s, and not beneficially. As fiction, Kundera’s works are not marred per se by the shifting between types of consciousness and authorial commentary,

and his work still could give vivid portraits of life at various moments in postwar Czechoslovakia.

Many of his characters are consumed by callous, unkind or opportunistic personal relationships (which is also mostly the case in his short stories collected in *Laughable Loves*). To some extent this undoubtedly reflects social life in the period after 1968 especially, but, nevertheless, the author seems to celebrate it. Much of it may simply leave a bad taste in the reader's mouth.

The moods of thousands of European intellectuals were reflected in these works, especially *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. It was almost impossible not to come across *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* after it was translated into English in 1983. The book was reviewed by many leading British and American authors and critics, including Philip Roth (who counted himself Kundera's friend), E. L. Doctorow, David Lodge, Irving Howe and John Updike, almost always favorably. It clearly struck a chord.

The real aesthetic limitations, and in fact, the real artistic-intellectual flaw of postmodernism, lie in Kundera's attitude toward history, a process that he was unable to grasp and that overtook and overwhelmed him. History exists for Kundera, but not as progress pushed forward and sometimes backwards, in dramatic and convulsive ways, by the conflict of social classes. Instead, it is a series of moods and illusions that usually result in mistakes whose origins lay in thought, not reality.

In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, for example, he has an entire section called the "Grand March," which is simply another expression for what has come to be known in postmodernist thinking and writing as the much-despised "Grand Narrative." Here he describes, cynically, a period in the youth of one of his characters, Franz, which, one suspects, resembles that of the young Kundera:

And so as long as he lived in Paris, he took part in every possible demonstration. How nice it was to celebrate something, demand something, protest against something; to be out in the open, to be with others. ... He saw the marching, shouting crowd as the image of Europe and its history. Europe was the Grand March. The march from revolution to revolution, from struggle to struggle, ever onward. ...

The Grand March is the splendid march on the road to brotherhood, equality, justice, happiness; it goes on and on. The dictatorship of the proletariat or democracy? Rejection of the consumer society or demands for increased productivity? The guillotine or an end to the death penalty? It is all beside the point.

His later work repeated these concepts and for the most part he discovered very little new in or about the world. In *Immortality* (1988), for example, a sprawling 345 pages in need of an assertive editor, Kundera's constructions sound at times a clear intellectual and aesthetic note, but just as often strike the ear as facile or half-baked.

The novel's single instance of "political" protest occurs when Professor Avenarius, seemingly another alter ego for Kundera, jogs at night with a concealed butcher's knife and plunges it into the tires of parked cars. Avenarius objects to the distraction cars create, their obstruction of one's ability to appreciate the architecture of Europe. Kundera, in conversation with his character, concludes that Avenarius realizes the futility of his actions—by extension, we are free to conclude, all political action—and that he commits his vandalism for "fun." Political futility and one's compromised aesthetic experience, such are the stakes by this point in Kundera's career.

Later in the novel, historical activity is boiled down to this condemnation of political opposition:

What makes people raise their fists in the air, puts rifles in their hands, drives them to join struggles for just and unjust causes, is not reason but a hypertrophied soul. It is the fuel without which the motor of history would stop turning and Europe would lie down in the grass and placidly watch clouds sail across the sky.

Kundera reflected the traumas and tragedies of his times, but only passively and partially. He overlaid his artistic insight with a thick layer of irrational intellectual meandering that became all the more bitter and subjective after he left Czechoslovakia and could write in relative freedom. His work stands out largely (except perhaps for *The Joke*) as a series of efforts, accurate and astute in some places, flabby and useless in others, to investigate his time. But the efforts were harmed by powerful social processes that pushed him off the path of creating the most accurate and clear-sighted pictures of life.

Again, Trotsky had the most profound insight into the destructive part played by Stalinism on intellectual and artistic life. He once noted that

the whole world situation impels talented and sensitive artists onto the road of revolutionary creativeness. But this road, alas, is obstructed with the rotting corpses of reformism and Stalinism.

Marxists, Trotsky went on, had no interest in "directing art, that is to say, [to] give orders or prescribe methods." He observed that genuinely creative revolutionary activity

has its own internal laws even when it consciously serves social development. Revolutionary art is incompatible with falsehood, hypocrisy, and the spirit of accommodation. Poets, artists, sculptors, musicians will themselves find their paths and methods, if the revolutionary movement of the masses dissipates the clouds of skepticism and pessimism which darken humanity's horizon today.

This is a fitting epitaph for Kundera and several generations of artists damaged by Stalinism.



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