Existentialism in the Journal *Letters* and the Following Debate of 1947–1948*

Josef Matoušek
Faculty of Humanities Charles University, Prague
Josef.Matousek@fhs.cuni.cz

The aim of the following paper is to present the third issue of the *Letters*, published by the Melantrich Publishing House on 15 February 1947, which reacted to the then growing popularity, especially in France, of a philosophical and cultural movement referred to as 'existentialism'. A special focus is placed on the nature of the thematic treatises that were intended to serve as an interpretation as well as an assessment of the aforementioned philosophical movement. In the Czech milieu, the corpus of existentialism was represented by new translations of the works of primary authors, mainly of German and French provenance, whose publication provoked wide debate concentrated around existential philosophy.

* * *

In 2013, Andy Martin, Professor of French at the University of Cambridge, published an article revealing a surprising discovery: the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) dedicated a considerable amount of attention to Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus. The famous bureau began keeping files on both men as of 1945, and 1946 respectively, collecting information by means of wiretapping, surveillance and even theft of personal effects. The result of these espionage activities were at very least bewildering reports – Sartre did nothing to protect his privacy, quite the contrary, he reportedly acted as if he wanted to share all of the aspects of his private life with the wider public. Notebooks that were stolen from them also turned out for the FBI to be a very user-*un*friendly source of information, as they were kept completely in French. So, they had to be sent back to the headquarters to be translated. Once translated, a real investigation could be launched. However, instead

* The text is part of the Czech Science Foundation grant project (GA ČR) *Individualism in the Czechoslovak Philosophy 1918–1948*, No. 19-14180S.

of compromising material, Sartre's notes were – much to the despair of the American agents – full of ontological formulations.

Yet, the mission was clear: J. Edgar Hoover, the then director of the FBI, needed to know what this highly popular existentialism was all about; most of all, whether the whole movement was nothing but sophistically concealed Marxism. This led to the production of copious amounts of material from the pens of "philosophising agents" who faced the strenuous, almost Sisyphean task for an untrained man – to deconstruct Sartre's thought as put forth in his *opus magnum*, *Being and Nothingness*.[1]

This anecdote illustrates the climate of that time well: in a world that was still slowly recovering from the horrors of the Second World War and that was progressively descending into bipolar geopolitical orientation, it was necessary to establish clearly who stood on which side of the emerging Iron Curtain – be it an individual, a political party or a whole philosophical movement. A movement could, after all, easily become an instrument of political influence and mobilisation of the public, posing a challenge to official propaganda. The demand for the assumption of a clear stance towards the trend of existential philosophy was, understandably, also pressing on the other side of the notional barricades. Within the Czechoslovak milieu, it crystallised into the publication of the third issue of the *Letters* in February 1947, dedicated in its entirety to existentialism.

The horrendous task of "dealing with existentialism" fell, rather than to government agents, to members of the university and intellectual elites of the time: the whole publication was edited by Jindřich Chalupecký, an art historian, and the individual studies were written by Ladislav Rieger, a professor (*On the Importance of Existential Philosophy / O významu filosofie existenciální*), Václav Navrátil, alumnus of the Faculty of Philosophy of Charles University in Prague, Ministry of Culture and Information official, and representative of the Czechoslovak Republic at UNESCO (*Knowledge and Existence / Poznání a existence*), and the almost forty-year-old Jan Patočka (*The Doubts about Existentialism / Pochybnosti o existencialismu*). Their studies were supplemented by translations of texts by L. Shestov (*Potestas clavium*), M. Heidegger (*What is Metaphysics? / Co je metafyzika*), K. Jaspers (*The Reality / Skutečnost*), F. Kafka (*A Report to An Academy / Zpráva o akademii, The New Advocate / Nový advokát, Up in the Gallery / Na galerii, An Old Manuscript / Starý list, Jackals and Arabs / Šakali a Arabové, Clothes / Šaty, Reflections for Gentlemen-Jockeys / Na rozmyšlenou pánskému jezdci, A Message from the Emperor /* Císařské poselství), G. Marcel (*On Freedom / O svobodě*), J.-P. Sartre (*Existen-*

1 Sartre, J.-P., *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology.* New York, Pocket Books 1978.

tialism is Humanism / Existencialismus je humanismus, *Intimity / Intimita*), A. Camus (*The Myth of Sisyphus / Mythus o Sisyfovi*, *Hope and Absurdity in Franz Kafka's Works / Naděje a absurdnost v díle Franze Kafky*) and J. Wahl (*On Existence / O existenci*). The issue also includes texts that are not focused on existentialism, namely texts by J. Chalupecký (*Note on Cézanne / Poznámka o Cézannovi*, *Culture / Kultura*), and L. Kundera, a writer, translator and Germanist (*Slovak Surrealists / Slovenští nadrealisté*).

The first three of the above studies are especially worthy of attention, as they are meant to serve as a kind of initiation into existential philosophy and a hermeneutic key to the translations on the list that follow them. The goal and gravity of the whole enterprise is announced immediately in the prologue:

> "Existentialism is nowadays at the centre of the attention of both philosophers and writers. It is of no importance that it has also immediately become fashionable; nevertheless, it is certain that it is one of the most significant and most hotly debated tendencies of contemporary philosophy.
>
> Its echo has already reached us; so far mostly in the form of sporadic and brief negative appraisals of it. I believe that the reaction to existentialism, if conducted in this manner from the very beginning, is entirely pointless. Should we deal with this philosophy at all, one must acquaint oneself with it by studying the original texts; which is the main goal of this issue of the *Letters* that has assembled, in addition to several Czech essays, a set of texts by all significant authors that claim allegiance to this philosophical movement or of those authors who feel a sympathy towards it."[2]

Much in the same way as the American investigators approached the relationship between existentialism to Marxism, here, too, it is evident from the very beginning where the biggest potential threat lies. As the author of the prologue adds:

> "Let us just note the ominous re-emergence in existential philosophy of Kierkegaard's term, despite all the later attempts at its correction (Jaspers, Sartre), the term *det Enkelte*, the individual."[3]

2 Chalupecký, J., Editorial. *The Letters: a Quaterly Journal for Art and Philosophy* (*Listy: čtvrtletník pro umění a filosofii*), No. 3. Praha, Melantrich 1947, p. 323.

3 Ibid.

Already in the introductory commentary can we see the exposition of an interpretative feature that strongly resonates throughout both the whole publication and the academic discussions that takes place in the following months: existentialism is understood as a philosophical movement whose focus lies predominantly on the individual, who is determined precisely by various aspects of their own individuality, and who manifests himself in various respects. Along with placing this emphasis on the individual, the prologue also reveals another feature typical for the Czechoslovak reception of existentialism, which is summarised in Lenin's quote, vigorously warning against philosophical idealism as a path leading to "clericalism".

This extrapolation therefore sets a perspective through which the whole discussion may be viewed: if existentialism is to have any say in the conflict for the spiritual values of the time, it must find its place in a territory that is already occupied by Marxism, or rather dialectical materialism on the one hand, and by Catholic minded groups on the other. Moreover, both camps are sworn enemies which makes the position of existentialism all the more delicate, as it could at the same time furnish both groups with arguments. The tension can be felt in an article by Ladislav Rieger titled *On the Importance of Existential Philosophy:*

> "It was Kant, Kant the representative of the Enlightenment, the supporter of French revolution, of the rights of man and a friend of Rousseau's, who first [established – J. M.] man and his existence as the core problem. It is not until Kant that all the main questions of philosophy are centred into one: what is man? Kant's answer to the question of the last goal of man's existence is: morality [TN: *Sittlichkeit* in German],[4] the moral existence of man on Earth. Here is the root of his anthropocentrism: morality [TN: *Sittlichkeit*] is something that is essentially human; if it is to be 'pure', then it must not be founded upon a system of threats and promises of rewards, i.e. it must not build on any religious, theocentric or theocratic 'morality' [TN: *Moralität*]. In this sense, Kant is a philosophical founder of democracy – that is, of the moral [TN: *sittlich*] autonomy of man. Thus, for Kant, religion is not the foundation of morality [TN: *Sittlichkeit*]. Here lies the main difference from the previous idea of man. In morality [TN: *Sittlichkeit*], man submits to the

4 The Czech language, similar to German, recognizes two different meanings of the word "morality": the Czech words "mravnost" and "morálka" correspond respectively to the German words "Sittlichkeit" and "Moralität". Since both Rieger and Kant use this distinction in their writings, we include this note to avoid any confusion. – Translator's note.

> orders of conscience as something that stands above him (as above the subject – the individual).[5]

In the history of philosophy, it is not until Feuerbach with his anthropocentric theory that Kant's project finds a continuator. According to Riegel, the existentialisms of Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Jaspers, as well as all those French variations deriving from them, still echo "questions concerning the purely Christian issue of man's relation to God's transcendence – positively or negatively so."[6]

The same overtones are apparent also in the next study by Václav Navrátil, *Knowledge and Existence*. This study is intended as a philosophical probe into key existentialist terminology and the problems connected to it. Because of the very ambitious aim of the study – to deal not only with knowledge, but also the overall method and thematisation of individual motives of a great number of authors (Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Jaspers, Marcel, Sartre) – it evidently struggles with finding a common denominator for all the authors.

This results in two tendencies – firstly, the study tends to resort to statements that cannot be accepted as factually accurate with respect to the authors discussed.[7] Secondly, the discussion repeatedly turns towards the aforementioned point of reference, subjectivity, or individuality, and its role in existentialism. This assessment of existentialism thus turns into an assessment of a philosophy with an emphasis on human individuality and, consequently, into an assessment of how each given philosopher addresses it.

The difficulties associated with assuming a clear and coherent stance become even more apparent in the parts that deal with existentialism as a whole. These parts reveal the ideological overtones outlined above:

> "Yet, freedom in the existentialist sense, especially in the French understanding of existentialism, may be interpreted as a breaking away from social and cultural bonds, not only in the sense of a revolution of scepticism, so common in France, but also in the sense of a hopeless liberalism, a hopeless independence from this world."[8]

5 Rieger, V., On the Importance of Existential Philosophy (O významu filosofie existenciální). *The Letters* (*Listy*), p. 333.

6 Ibid., p. 334. Rieger considers Masaryk's humanism to be a possible way towards Feuerbach's and Rádl's concept of the "idea of man". Ibid., p. 335.

7 "In Sartre's understanding, nothingness is not a delimiting term, on the contrary, it is presented as a method of annihilating or interrupting existence." Navrátil, V., Knowledge and Existence (Poznání a existence). *The Letters* (*Listy*), p. 344.

8 Ibid., p. 348.

The danger of existentialism, according to the author, lies in the possibility of interpretation of its thesis centred on the question of human individuality in a manner approaching liberalism, which is, understandably, unacceptable. However, there was an even greater danger within the Czechoslovak context – the existentialist emphasis on human individuality could potentially serve as a path towards a hypostasis of human interiority and so towards a way of thinking inclined to Catholicism. This potential way of interpreting existentialist philosophy also had to be blocked:

> "Although the philosophy of existence begins with subjectivity, man is not posited here by *his own* subjectivity, his inner life, his unique self. Here, man is not a personalist expression. Existentialism at its beginning and at its end is not a personalist philosophy. Man exists in this world only as a species. And in all probability not as a special spiritual category in the world."[9]

Thus, existentialism was presented as being completely incompatible with the thought of the personalists then associated with the journal *Esprit*[10] – paradoxically enough, many significant personalist thinkers were absolutely crucial for the development of French existentialism, and G. Marcel, one of their main representatives, is on the list of authors whose translations were published in this particular volume of the *Letters* (*Listy*). However, the situation in the already occupied intellectual territory was merciless and, where existentialism was used as an instrument of criticism of religiously-minded authors, its relationship to dialectic materialism as its philosophical foundation also had to be proven. Thus, Navrátil concludes his article by saying:

> "Existence in the existentialist sense is not a biological, or moral history, but a transcendentalist *construct*. This term is created by *dialectical* means (it is construed using a/ negation, b/ paradox, and c/ speculation)."[11]

9 Ibid., p. 352.

10 The journal *Esprit* was founded in 1932 by a French philosopher Emmanuel Mounier, who was inclined towards Catholicism, with a group of likeminded friends. It provided a publishing platform for authors who accentuated the irreducible value of the human person and thus stood up against both individualist materialism connected with capitalism and collectivist materialism connected with communism. According to the personalists, both of these conceptions of man (and society) lead to anonymisation (and so to a suppression of personality) in the *milieu* of mass society. The personalists also vigorously stood up against false spirituality of fascism that leads the idolatry of race, authoritarian leadership, economy, etc. The Vichy regime banned the journal in 1941 for obvious reasons. Mounier resumed its printing in 1944 (after his short mobilisation and consequent imprisonment). The journal is still published to this day.

11 Navrátil, V., Knowledge and Existence, p. 359.

Thus, existentialism is presented as a school of thought which is wholly incompatible with Christian personalism (and, as such, relevant), but also as a school of thought that is empty and merely formal rather than advocating any concrete values – depending on how far it strayed from philosophical Marxism.

Patočka's study *Doubts about Existentialism*, the last thematic text contained in the *Letters*, significantly differs from the previous two texts in its conciseness and, most of all, in the absence of political pathos typical for the period. It deals with existentialism (unlike the two previous texts) purely philosophically. Patočka focuses especially on Sartre and on the very foundation of his thinking of that time, i.e. the foundation of subjectivity, or existence, using erudite phenomenological analysis. However, Sartre's philosophy, as presented and interpreted by Patočka, does not correspond in many important areas to how Sartre himself actually deals with the given problems in his texts that had been published until then. Nevertheless, Patočka identifies transcendentalist features in Sartre's philosophy and describes them as follows:

> "The transcendence of the Self, its superiority in regard to the world as well as its absence in the world are proven by the fact that the Self is always where nobody can search for it. Each search has that which is sought after at its end: the end is the goal, hence *finis*. However, the Self is always at the beginning and if one wanted to find it one would have to connect the beginning to the end: but doing that would make both disappear. After all, this is also why Cogito is the primum principium: it is impossible to go beyond it, every search has the Self at its apex, the Self is always the apex; the Self is the first truth that never disappears, just like a life vest always rises back to the water's surface, just like a roly-poly doll always stands up straight again."[12]

Yet, Sartre's text from 1936 reads: "[…] the Ego is neither formally nor materially *within consciousness*: it is outside, at large in the world; it is a being in the world, like the Ego of another".[13] Later he even says:

> "The World did not create the I, the I did not create the World, they are two objects for the absolute, impersonal consciousness, and it is

12 Patočka, J., Doubts about Existentialism (Pochybnosti o existencialismu). *The Letters* (*Listy*), p. 361.

13 Sartre, J.-P., *The Transcendence of the Ego*. Milton – London, Taylor & Francis – Routledge 2011, p. 12–13. And later he continues: "My I, indeed, *is no more certain for consciousness than the I of other men*. It is simply more intimate." Ibid., p. 111.

> through that consciousness that they are linked back together. This absolute consciousness, when it is purified of the I, no longer contains in any way a subject, nor is it a corpus of representations; it is quite simply a precondition and an absolute source of existence."[14]

Patočka's interpretation, unfortunately, continues in the abovementioned spirit and so the conclusions it reaches are not surprising:

> "Therefore, the condition of the possibility of consciousness is nothingness which does not exist, but, nevertheless, manifests itself by annihilating (néantising) and, in doing so, makes the difference between the subject and the object possible, indeed all differences in general."[15]

However, Sartre's texts that were available at that time suggest something quite different: Nothingness is not a condition for the possibility of consciousness, but consciousness itself.[16]

This consciousness which always necessarily relates to something is, moreover, exactly that to which Sartre ascribes the quality of existence.[17] And so, despite its philosophical depth and evident familiarity with the phenomenological background of the problem at hand, Patočka's text unfortunately misfired and in the end added to the substantial distortion of existentialism. Whereas the two previous texts succumbed to highlighting political

14 Ibid., p. 113.

15 Patočka, J., Doubts about Existentialism, p. 362.

16 " 'The being of consciousness,' we said in the Introduction, 'is a being such that in its being, its being is in question,' This means that the being of consciousness does not coincide with itself in a full equivalence. Such equivalence, which is that of the in-itself, is expressed by this simple formula: being is what it is. In the in-itself there is not a particle of being which is not wholly within itself without distance. When being is thus conceived there is not the slightest suspicion of duality in it; this is what we mean when we say that the density of being of the in-itself is infinite. It is a fullness. […] The in-itself is full of itself, and no more total plenitude can be imagined, no more perfect equivalence of content to container. There is not the slightest emptiness in being, not the tiniest crack through which nothingness might slip in. The distinguishing characteristic of consciousness, on the other hand, is that it is a decompression of being. Indeed it is impossible to define it as coincidence with itself." Sartre, J.-P., *Being and Nothingness*, p. 74.

17 "[…] Every conscious existence exists as consciousness of existing." Ibid., p. 54. "Consciousness is a plenum of existence, and this determination of itself by itself is an essential characteristic. It would even be wise not to misuse the expression 'cause of self,' which allows us to suppose a progression, a relation of self-cause to self-effect. It would be more exact to say very simply: The existence of consciousness comes from consciousness itself. By that we need not understand that consciousness 'derives from nothingness.' There cannot be 'nothingness of consciousness' before consciousness. […] If there is to be nothingness of consciousness, there must be a consciousness which has been and which is no more and a witnessing consciousness which poses the nothingness of the first consciousness for a synthesis of recognition. Consciousness is prior to nothingness and 'is derived' from being." Ibid., p. 56.

aspects, Patočka takes a sceptical stance towards existentialism on the grounds of a philosophical analysis which, nevertheless, leads him to similar assertions: the philosophy of existence is diagnosed with transcendentalism; for him, as one can say with a pinch of salt, it is "an acute inflammation of individualism" which this philosophy is incapable of curing on its own.

Still, Patočka's purely philosophical interpretation remains unique due to it being apolitical, which continues to be a unique feature even in the following discussions that continued for several months. Two authors stand out amongst those who reacted to existentialism due to their contrasting stances expressed in their journal articles as well as in independent texts: according to Vlasta Tatjana Miškovská : "[…] the third issue of the *'Letters'* represents a significant source of information"[18] and she thought that "we ought not overestimate the importance of existentialism."[19] Václav Černý, on the other hand, was highly critical of his colleagues:

> "When translating a thinker who has not only invented something new, but also created new concepts for his new way of thinking by revisiting old ones, one must first get a good understanding of them; and right after that one needs to invent new and equally meaningful terms in one's own mother tongue as equivalents of those concepts. However, one cannot find such equivalents by simply substituting each word of the original text with the first definition that we find in the dictionary. If there was some darkness hanging above existentialism, this issue of the *'Letters'* did less than it could to disperse it."[20]

Both of these authors elaborate their analyses in the form of individual monographic studies in 1947 that are published a year later. While Černý describes existentialism in his *First Notebook on Existentialism* (*První sešit o existencialismu*)[21] as "a philosophy of pleasure, not of discourse" based on "subjective life reality, i.e. something that is especially varied",[22] Miškovská still advocates her dismissive stance in the essay *Existentialism Is Not a Humanism* (*Existencialismus není humanismus*)[23] and attributes "speculative

18 Miškovská, V. T., Existentialism in the *Letters* (Existencialismus v *Listech*). *Česká mysl*, 40, 1947, No. 3, p. 170–174, esp. p. 174.

19 Ibid.

20 Černý, V., Initiation into Existentialism (Zasvěcení do existencialismu). *Kritický měsíčník*, 8, 1947, No. 9–10, 30. 5., p. 249–251.

21 Černý, V., *The First and Second Notebook on Existentialism* (*První a druhý sešit o existencialismu*). Praha, Mladá fronta 1992.

22 Ibid., p. 25–56.

23 Miškovská, V. T., *Existentialism is Not a Humanism* (*Existencialismus není humanismus*). Praha, Kostnická jednota v Praze II 1948.

incapacity, lack of literary taste [and] a decadent tiredness of humanity" to Sartre.[24] Nevertheless, a surprisingly similar argumentation line runs through the cores of both authors' interpretations and revolves around several interconnected motifs – an emphasis on the indeterministic character of human action, the (non)existence of God, the burden of responsibility and the necessity of choice (i.e. the creation of one's own existence) and the relation of the individual to others.

The discrepancy in the resulting assessments becomes quite explicitly plain when we compare both authors' conclusions on "existential methodology". Miškovská concludes that "Sartre makes the same mistake of assuming an overly confident approach to the particularities of mental life, like those German existentialists who act almost as if they have just discovered introspection. However, he has only one thing in common with these self-declared pioneers: *the usage of fragmentary observations untouched by any method worthy of the name*".[25] By contrast, Černý, during his search for "existentialist techné", praises this common feature:

> "The phenomenology of Edmund Husserl, a native of Moravia […], served as a method for existentialism (Sartre, Marcel): Action is the phenomenologist's point of departure, it helps him avoid the dead end in which philosophy hopelessly finds itself after several centuries of disputes between materialism and spiritualism over the nature of being […]."[26]

The atmosphere in the following months as well as the nature of the debate over existentialism was perhaps best illustrated by Vladimír Tardy, a future professor, Chair of the Department of Psychology at Charles University, and Director of the Psychological Institute of the Czechoslovak Academy of

24 Ibid., p. 54.

25 Ibid., p. 36. Miškovská makes the same comment also elsewhere: "This circumstance, which is in itself seemingly marginal, is telling for one feature of existentialist thinking, present both in philosophy and literature: an almost complete loss of adherence to any method and thus also a loss of the prerequisite for self-discipline at interpreting somebody else's work and at attaining general knowledge of cultural life as such." Ibid., p. 14.

26 Černý, V., *The First and Second Notebook on Existentialism*, p. 17. *The Second Notebook on Existentialism*, dedicated to the analysis of Czechoslovak poetic and prosaic works that showed some traits of existential tones (especially Bednář, Orten, Blatný, Kainar, Hanuš, Březovský, Urbánek, Dvořáček and others), was supposed to be a continuation of the *First Notebook on Existentialism* and its third edition, as the first two editions were immediately sold out. This too can be taken as evidence and a partial explanation why Černý was much more "tolerant", in comparison to Miškovská, towards the plurality of opinions and methods of existential authors introduced in the first notebook.

Sciences.[27] In 1947, he published an article in the journal *Česká mysl* with the laconic title *Existentialism* (*Existencialismus*). It does not deal with the philosophical foundations, arguments or ambitions of the movement in question, nor does it offer a general overview of it. Instead, without further ado, it identifies existentialism purely with Sartre's thinking as represented in one of his public lectures. Tardy writes:

> "Sartre claims that when one is making a decision, one is all alone and cannot rely on anybody else. Today I can admire Russia, but who can guarantee that the proletariat will continue in my (!) work after my death? What fantastic egocentrism! The existentialist is anxiously deciding in favour of his own humanism and trusts nobody but himself. Since he takes himself to be the centre of the world, determining the fate of humanity, this distrust towards others is understandable. French individualism is intensified here to the point of being pathological."[28]

This evidently identifies the crucial problem due to which existentialism had to be excluded from the post-war struggle for spiritual values in Czechoslovakia: the freedom of choice that Sartre promoted so much crystallised out of various domestic interpretations into being the cardinal aspect of his thinking. Although the freedom to choose "beyond good and evil" in a world ridded of the metaphysical absolute and material predetermination could be used against personalists and other circles of pro-Catholic intellectuals, it could just as well be turned against the Marxists due to its emphasis on personal freedom and the necessity of choice. According to Tardy, the examples of particular human action that Sartre lists just go to "prove the unprincipled nature of existentialism. Each choice is meant to be strictly principled, yet I could choose love over morality just as well as, conversely, I could opt for Catholicism just as much as I can opt for communism."[29]

This clinging to the possibility of absolute ideological collaboration was thus highlighted as the twisted essence of existentialism that had to be publicly rejected. Tardy's claims sometimes come close to disgust:

27 A general context of the reception of existentialism in Czechoslovakia was summarised by Jan Zouhar. See Zouhar, J., Existentialism and Czech Philosophy 1945–1948 (Existencialismus a české myšlení 1945–1948). *Studia Philosophica*, 60, 2013, No. 1, p. 37–46. Further information is also to be found in the antology of texts on Czechoslovak individualism in 1918–1948 which is to be published in 2021 by Karolinum Press.

28 Tardy, V., Existentialism (Existencialismus). *Česká mysl*, 40, 1947, No. 3, p. 153–157, esp. p. 156.

29 Ibid., p. 156.

> "The extraordinary weakness of reason and the emotional corruptness of existentialism would be but an incomprehensible perversion were it not an expression of a whole social group […]."[30]

However, Tardy perhaps drew from Sartre's lectures more than he would have been willing to admit. In the following decades he underwent a radical personal and philosophical transformation and, despite his previous enthusiasm for Marxism, he became one of the first signatories of *Charter 77*.[31]

* * *

In the months that followed the Second World War, "existential philosophy" reached the peak of its popularity in France as well as in the rest of Europe. Through its most prominent representatives and their works, it offered the country, ravaged by the war, a chance for renewal in a variety of ways: firstly, it presented a certain unified, cohesive image of France, secondly, it provided individual segments of French society with vocabulary that helped to acknowledge and come to terms with the experiences of wartime, and thirdly, with its emphasis on personal responsibility, it was a suitable continuation of the *épuration légale*[32] which made it an appropriate means of healing the "cultural trauma" caused by the war.[33]

The intellectual climate of Czechoslovakia – whose situation was not dissimilar to that of France – was not, however, favourably disposed to existentialism. The presented examples of the domestic reception of existentialism clearly show the dismissive undertones pervading them, undertones of a prevalently socialist orientation in various intensities and, in fact, they can be taken to herald the approaching Communist coup d'état of February 1948. The function and role of human individuality with respect to ethical, social, religious and metaphysical questions turned out to be one of the key

30 Ibid., p. 157.

31 Císařovská, B. – Prečan, V., *Charter 77: The Documents 1977–1989, Vol. 1–3* (*Charta 77: Dokumenty 1977–1989. Svazek 1–3*). Praha, Ústav pro soudobé dějiny AV 2007, p. 1–5, esp. p. 24. – For the sake of objectivity, we should note that Sartre, too, went through an intellectual evolution in the following years, with the "trajectory" of his evolution being remarkably opposite: he builds his own Marxist position and describes its compatibility with his "earlier" existentialism, first, rather inconspicuously, in a 1957 article titled *Search for a Method* (*Questions de méthode*), and three years later in the book *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (*Critique de la raison dialectique*; in which the aforementioned article is included as the preface). Sartre, J.-P., *Questions de méthode*. Paris, Gallimard 1986; included in: Sartre, J.-P., *Critique de la raison dialectique*. Nouvelle édition. Paris, Gallimard 1985.

32 "Legal purge" – this term denotes the wave of official trials that followed the Liberation of France and the fall of the Vichy Regime.

33 Bearet, P., *The existentialist moment. The rise of Sartre as a public intellectual*. Cambridge, Polity Press 2015, p. 143.

issues as well as the unifying element of domestic publications. The February coup, however, caused a radical turn in academic orientation of many of those authors. Černý's *Notebooks on Existentialism* (*Sešity o existencialismu*) were confiscated and their publication was forbidden. Václav Navrátil and Jindřich Chalupecký were banned from publishing and Jan Patočka was forced to leave Charles University a year later. The interpretations of existentialism that were presented above thus reveal the specifics of a relatively short, albeit formative period of the Third Czechoslovak Republic, a period marked by its being wedged between two significant milestones of Czechoslovak history.