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Throughout its history, the French Communist Party (Parti communiste français or PCF), founded in December 1920, has used a number of media, including many publishing houses. From 1920 to 1993, it set up fifteen such houses, one record company, two newspaper delivery services, and a network of bookshops. This publishing group disappeared in 1993, owing to the economic and political crisis in France during the 1980s and the collapse of the USSR. As this paper will show, in the history of the French Communist Party books and publishing had a very important role, a role they gradually lost through competition from other media.

From the Russian Revolution to the Liberation of France

The PCF was born from a split within the Socialist Party (SP) at the Congress of Tours in December 1920: this was the way in which the first French Communists, appealing to the youngest and the poorest of the SP, chose to join the Communist International (the Third International or Komintern). This support did not really translate into an ideological adherence; rather, it was a rejection of the policy of the French Socialists during World War I (when the SP had endorsed the war), and of its traditional leaders, held guilty of being intellectuals rather than workers.

The split prompted a division of SP property, part of which was a publishing institution, the Librairie de l’Humanité (Bookshop of Humankind) linked to the famous Socialist newspaper l’Humanité. The Librairie de l’Humanité, established in 1905, was not the only Socialist Party publishing venture, for Socialist propaganda was diverse, translating the many political trends existing in the party. The Librairie de l’Humanité was not a full-fledged publishing house, but rather a propaganda service that published and sold mostly booklets, leaflets, posters, and also plaster busts and medals, and everything needed in elections, meetings and demonstrations.

The French Communists inherited the Librairie de l’Humanité at the end of the Congress of Tours, as the publishing house to which befell the task of building “a party of a new type,” to quote the Russian Bolsheviks. A Bolshevik party was like an army, standing at the head of the labour movement, forming the “vanguard of the proletariat.” Consequently, the militants had to be professional revolutionaries,

The Librairie de L’Humanité was supposed to play a key role, but from December 1920 to the spring of 1924, its results were mixed. The first French Communists did not realize how imperative orders from the Komintern in Moscow were. The catalogue was a mix of French Socialist traditions and Bolshevik literature. The Librairie published 108 titles, much more than during the entire Socialist period. A large majority of these publications were essays, speeches and minutes of Congresses. History and biographies made up the rest. Seventy-two percent of the publications were in booklet form, and forty-five percent of the authors were from the Soviet Union. This means that a majority of these political texts were written by French authors, even former Socialists such as Charles Rappoport or Marcel Cachin, not really considered reliable by Moscow. Moreover, the financial situation of the Librairie de l’Humanité was critical: these booklets did not sell easily, even though their print run was only 7000 copies on average. The first years seemed to bear out a cliché, a perception that was already widespread before 1914: French activists, unlike German activists, did not read.

In 1924, the Komintern decided to transform the PCF into a real Bolshevik party. It chose new leaders, organised schools for militants both in the USSR and in France, and took absolute control over the party press and the Librairie de l’Humanité. Moreover, it decided to promote a new literature, the proletarian novel, with the help of a number of Soviet organisations such as RAPP (Russian Association of Proletarian Writers) and VOKS (Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries). Last but not least, the USSR and the Komintern promoted Lenin’s works and gave two new institutions, the Marx-Engels Institute and the Lenin Institute, full authority for collecting and translating his texts for the world to read. The aim here was to build a new man, with a new culture, and to export the Bolshevik revolution.

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4 Agit-Prop is the contraction of the two words Agitation (propaganda for the masses) and Propaganda (political education of the militants), both Leninist concepts.

5 A part of the catalogue can be found online (http://www.enssib.fr/bibliotheque-numerique/document-1547).


To reach this goal, the Komintern set up a new service in Moscow, the Publishing Service. This institution would set up Communist publishing houses throughout the world, control their catalogues (made up of translations from the Russian and national works) and promote the same political literature everywhere. In 1927, it claimed to be present in forty countries and to publish in forty-seven languages. In France, it forced the creation of two new publishing houses that took over from the Librarie de l’Humanité: the Bureau d’éditions, de diffusion et de publicité (BEDP) in 1926, which was to take care of French works (leaflets, speeches and articles), and the Editions sociales internationales (ESI) in 1927, which specialised in the publication of Lenin’s works and new Soviet novels. The entire structure was entrusted to Libert Cical, a militant activist from Romania and World War I veteran in the French Foreign Legion, a self-educated and efficient administrator. He replaced intellectuals such as Boris Souvarine or Claude Calzan who had led the organisation up to then. For the Komintern and the French Communist leaders, both institutions were considered propaganda services rather than publishing houses. The decision to publish a work belonged to the political leaders, and above all to the Komintern, not to Cical.

The first consequence of these changes was a growing output, from sixty-two titles in 1925 to eighty-nine in 1932, which fell back to sixty-five in 1934. But the print runs were not high: 5600 on average. The second major change was the place given to works translated from the Russian: in 1930, seventy-one percent of the works in the catalog of the BEDP and the ESI were translated from Russian.

The publishing houses did not release the same type of texts: French works (speeches and reprinting of French newspaper articles) and political theory in a digest form belonged to the BEDP catalogue, while the complete works of Lenin and a few vulgariations of works by Marx and Engels came out through the ESI. From 1927 to 1934, the BEDP published more titles (335 titles versus 75 for the ESI), with larger print runs (6000 compared to 3200). The common feature of both houses was the significant place given to a new form of publication in the Communist catalogue: the textbook, aimed at pupils of Communist schools. There were only a few, but they were given a major role: *Leninisme theorique et pratique* by Stalin (1933) had 10,000 copies issued, and the titles in the series *Les Éléments du communisme* (1928) were similarly important.

The other common feature of the BEDP and the ESI was their Kafkaesque daily life, a characteristic of the time. Each stage of production was fastidiously controlled by Moscow—the text, the translation, the footnotes and all the critical apparatus, even the covers—leading to lengthy epistolary exchanges and major delays. This obsessive control came from the belief that reading was dangerous:

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militants could misunderstand a text, a sentence, a word. They had to be protected through strict control of the editorial process and a heavy critical apparatus. The published book might become canonical, the only correct printed version of the only correct political thought. Also, militants were not actual readers, with their own sensibility and culture, but pupils who had to read a textbook—sometimes the leaders would talk about the ideal book as a "catechism"—in which they would find the tools that would help them become adequate professional revolutionaries.

Moreover, a consequence of this point of view was that the only legitimate author was the Communist Party itself. This explains the absence of the translators' name on the books. Eventually, this obsessive yearning for control was strengthened by Stalinist repression in the USSR and inside the Komintern. The editorial process became ever longer, many translators disappeared, projects were delayed or abandoned. PCF leaders accepted this situation with no qualms, while the ESI was gradually paralysed. For example, the important project of the publication of the complete works of Lenin failed: thirty volumes were expected to be published in 1927; only eight had come out by 1935.

Communist logic required that the Party be always right. Consequently, in the case of failure, the publisher was guilty. However, Cical and the other comrades who managed the ESI and the BEDP rejected this Communist discipline. They denounced the absurd processes they were subjected to, and demanded more freedom. Their demands also encompassed the possibility of publishing French thinkers (Guesde, Jaurès or Lafargue) or books about French labour history. Moscow refused. They asked for permission to publish Marx's *Capital.* Moscow replied that the French translation was not ready.

The editors' exasperation was also partly explained by another worrying phenomenon: the marginalisation of the PCF, politically and culturally. The organisation seemed on its way to becoming a sect, with only 28,000 members in 1933, and 8.4 percent of the vote in the legislative elections of 1932. Cical and his comrades were struck by some embarrassing facts. First, the "bourgeois" publishing houses, such as Rieder, Gallimard or Montaigne, had promoted Soviet novels before the PCF did. Even when it came to Marxist publications, the PCF was seemingly outperformed by the bourgeoisie. Albert Costes published the complete works of Marx in 1924, which became the only available French translation until the 1950s. The few Communist intellectuals, including Georges Politzer, Henri Lefebvre and Paul Nizan, were translating and publishing works of Marx on their own in *Les Revues* or with Gallimard. Lastly, even though the French Communists were

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11 Albert Vassart, Statement. Central Committee of the PCF, Paris, 1933. IML 592, Archives du Parti communiste français [hereafter Arch. PCF], Archives départementales, Seine-Saint-Denis.
accused of not reading books, they did read, but leaflets rather than thick books—that is to say, French works (speeches and digests of political books) rather than translations of works written by their Soviet comrades.

The traumatic political crisis of Hitler’s victory in Germany and the collapse of the German Communist Party in 1933, and the rising threats in Europe and Asia, offered a way out to Cical. In July 1935, the VIIth Congress of the Komintern announced a new strategy, the Popular Front, meaning a political alliance with the Socialists, the “former enemies,” against the fascists. This meant that the French Communists could publish Jaurès.

But the relationship between the PCF and Cical had worsened. Especially hated by the new French Communist leader, Maurice Thorez, Cical was fired and replaced by two important personalities with cultural backgrounds: Léon Moussinac and René Hilsum. Both were Communists: Moussinac was a movie buff, a founder of the French cinéphile movement, and had significant experience in publishing; Hilsum was the publisher of the surrealists through his house Au sans pareil. The Party entrusted the two men with the mission of transforming the lists of the ESI and the BEDP according to Popular Front tenets. They did it with the help of their own social networks, outside the traditional hunting grounds of the PCF. In a way, they were accomplishing Cical’s program.

During the spring of 1936, the BEDP and the ESI took part in the campaign and political victory of the Popular Front. This meant restructuring their catalogue in three directions. First, they offered books that dealt with all aspects of culture (novels, children’s books, poetry, theatre, history, philosophy, science). Secondly, they published non-Communist authors, such as Romain Rolland, as well as Communists. Lastly, they were allowed to publish Marx’s Capital (1937), as well as the first French Communist works about Marxist thinking, exemplified by the two volumes of A la lumière du marxisme (1937–1938). The Party also extended the reach of its propaganda with the setting up of a record company, Chant du Monde, in 1937.

But the Popular Front period had a gloomy aspect. Textbooks, political digests and the reproduction of speeches had remained important (eighty-one percent of the catalogue), with significant sales. The Komintern and the PCF thought that their political victory would give them a strong enough audience to sell all their productions and that the main “bourgeois” publishing houses would disappear with the crisis of the 1930s. In fact, the economic crisis was hitting everybody.

When the Popular Front was dissolved in 1937, the mission entrusted to Moussinac and Hilsum changed: the French Communist leaders no longer needed to diversify their readership, but wanted rather to concentrate on the

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The Long Twentieth Century

235

Party core, and on ideology only. Opening the catalogue to non-Communist authors, or publishing more novels, ceased to be options. Moussinac was having a very difficult time: not only were his projects stopped, but the economic crisis was also felt at both the ESI and the BEDP. Their books did not sell. The reason was both economic (purchasing power was too low to buy non-essentials) and political: the PCF’s allies were disturbed by their giving up their pacifist strategy in favour of an exclusively anti-fascist position, in a country where pacifist tendencies were becoming stronger. They were also shocked by the Moscow trials. The situation became so serious that the PCF considered merging the two publishing houses with its press delivery services, the Centre de diffusion du Livre et de la Presse (CDLP), created in 1933.

For Communist leaders, the priority was to publish two works in particular. The first came out in 1937: it was the autobiography of the general secretary, Maurice Thorez, Fils du peuple.\textsuperscript{15} There was a major advertising campaign that lasted from October 1937 to April 1938 and 130,000 copies were sold, mostly bought by French militants. In 1938, the Komintern decided to publish, in twenty-eight languages, “a history textbook about the Komintern, a manual for workers edifying them about the Party.” 700,000 copies were to be printed worldwide.\textsuperscript{16} \textit{L’Histoire du PC(b) de l’URSS} was published in Paris, by the BEDP, in April 1939. The whole political organisation of the PCF was called upon to sell it. The goal was to sell 300,000 copies, which meant that each French Communist had to buy one copy.

The campaign was interrupted by the announcement of the German-Soviet Pact on August 23, 1939. The war stopped the transformation of the PCF into a powerful national organisation. During this evolution, books and leaflets were used as weapons, first as textbooks for training comrades politically, then to reach out to other professional categories, such as teachers or artists.

Experiencing Clandestinity

The war confirmed the usefulness of the printed book as a medium. Still, during World War II, all media were used: radio broadcasting, movies, posters, pictures, newspapers. The PCF did likewise. While books again became the main medium for training militants, they were also reaching the population at large. In hiding from August 1939, the leadership first decided to build an underground organisation intended mainly to publish the first clandestine newspaper, \textit{l’Humanité}, from October 1939, in roneotyped form. After the collapse of France, with the German


\textsuperscript{16} Notes: Secretary, 10th June 1939, IML, 819, Arch. PCF, Archives départementales, Seine-Saint-Denis.
invasion in May and June 1940, the PCF succeeded over the autumn of 1940 in printing *l’Humanité* by letterpress. This feat of engineering made the publishing of books possible: the French Communists would print seventy-two underground booklets during the war. During the winter of 1940–41, the clandestine Party managed to print its first texts, and about twenty-five texts were published up to June 1941. Almost all of these were textbooks: for instance, the *Manifeste du Parti Communiste* by Marx and Engels, *Des Principes du Leninisme* by Stalin, or chapters of the *Histoire du PC(b) de l’URSS*. At the beginning of 1941, a work quite different from all these was published: *Revolution et Contre-Revolution au xx<sup>e</sup> Siècle*, by Georges Politzer. This was the first Communist publication that clearly denounced the antisemitic ideology of Nazism. The change of strategy with the German–Soviet War from the 22nd of June 1941 prompted the PCF again to expand its propaganda themes: it needed to speak to the whole population, not only to workers, and in particular to the intellectual community. From August 1941 to 1943, the Party published three literary works (by Guy de Maupassant, Victor Hugo and Eugène Tarlè), in a series entitled *Hier et Aujourd’hui*. One goal was to convince the people, by the means of literature, to take up armed struggle. 17

When the intellectual community allied with the Communists became more organised, with a central role given to the Comité national des écrivains (CNE), the PCF left underground literary activity to resistance writers. As a result, the CNE used the Editions de Minuit, which began with the underground publication *Le Silence de la Mer* by Vercors in February 1942. 18 In the south of France (the unoccupied *Zone libre*), another clandestine publishing house, La Bibliothèque française, was founded by the famous Communist writer Louis Aragon, in the spring of 1943, but it never gained as much prestige as its northern counterpart.

Despite the leadership of the CNE, and notwithstanding the importance of underground literature in the history of World War II, the core of Communist propaganda remained focused on political training, and its favoured medium remained the press. Moreover, as far as the general French population was concerned, the key information medium was radio, especially the BBC and the Swiss radio stations. The World War II era did not mark the triumph of printed texts; rather, it marked the triumph of audio-visual propaganda.

**1945–1956: Propaganda, Political Culture and Publishing**

When France was liberated, the Parti communiste took a leading part in French political life. But its political culture remained the same: the first aim of a publishing house was still the political training of the many new militants. This task

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befell a new Communist publishing house, set up at the end of 1944, the Editions sociales. For the larger population, the PCF turned for the second time to the reborn Editions Hier et Aujourd’hui in 1945, while Louis Aragon pursued the same goal with the Bibliothèque française. But, according to the archives of the PCF, as far as the leadership was concerned, publishing novels was a very peripheral activity compared to newspapers or textbooks. The three publishing houses issued up to around one hundred titles in 1946 and 1947, with printing runs of 20,000 copies on average: the book was a tool to take power but came behind the press, posters, and maybe radio and cinema as well in this respect.\textsuperscript{19}

The Cold War period also corresponds to the beginning of the economic crisis in publishing. Because of the low standard of living, and publishing lists that didn’t interest French readers, new books weren’t selling well. The Communist publishing houses had to withstand both shocks, political and commercial. As a consequence, the PCF leaders decided to reorganise the publishing institutions. On one hand, Editions sociales was reoriented towards ideological works. On the other hand, three houses were merged in 1949: Hier et Aujourd’hui, the Bibliothèque française and France d’Abord (which published military books and comic books for children). This decision gave birth to a new organisation, the Editeurs français réunis (EFR), directed by Aragon. In spite of its limited interest in non-ideological books, the leadership also set up two new publishing houses: the Cercle d’art in 1949, which published art books, and La Farandole in 1955, for children’s books. The latter was to become the most famous publishing house of the PCF along with Editions sociales.

The final balance sheet is hard to draw up. Quantitatively, the whole venture was a failure. The average print run fell from 14,000 per title in 1948 to 5,400 in 1956; ninety-five titles were published in 1952, only seventy-five in 1955. Nevertheless, Editions sociales managed to establish a real editorial policy, for the first time in PCF history. Thanks to the activity of Georges Cogniot, Editions sociales offered its audience new and scientific translation of ideological texts, plus classical texts by French Socialist thinkers of the nineteenth century. At the other end of the spectrum, Aragon failed to impose his views about the EFR. He had a coherent editorial policy (French classical literature, Soviet novels and young Communist writers), but his plans foundered because of the political context. The propaganda had to be first. But even the Soviet novels—in the series Le Pays de Staline (1949–1951)—weren’t selling well. The PCF was politically isolated, even before the crisis of 1956 produced by the invasion of Hungary and the denunciation of the crimes of Stalinism during the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the USSR. The departure of young French writers from the EFR before 1956 proves it. Aragon never succeeded in building a coherent list.

Ranking as the second biggest political force in France, the PCF was trying to break out of its cultural isolation by organising political campaigns denouncing the bellicose ideologies of America and its allies, and American mass culture as proof of moral decadence and corruption. These enemies were guilty of censorship of “progressive” (and Communist) publications and of preventing the PCF from distributing “correct” books to the French people. In fact, the publishers’ background had not changed since the interwar period. They had not been concerned by the purges during the Liberation when the new government gave priority to purging the press, the archetypal popular mass media. For the heads of these publishing houses, the situation was dire: they were not seen as real publishers either by the PCF (for which they were mere activists), or in professional publishing circles.

At the end of the 1940s, the Communist publishing houses had failed to break into the French book market. While the PCF was undeniably an important political force, it was unable to act outside its sphere of influence. It had tried to overcome this limitation in many ways, including in the world of book publishing. It created a Defence Committee for French Books in 1948, it participated in the struggle against American comic books along with the Catholics (a campaign that succeeded in winning passage of a law on the protection of the youth in 1949), and in 1951 it allied again with the Catholics in a campaign for the moralisation of the feminine press. These campaigns were both used to further Communist influence in French culture and to support Soviet propaganda themes.

The most important of these campaigns was the “Bataille du Livre.” In 1948, author Elsa Triolet, Aragon’s wife, came up with a blueprint to promote “correct books” and reading, in her book L’Ecrivain ou la suite dans les idées. She built on two experiments: the popular and successful book sales organized by the CNE from 1950 to 1953, and a Soviet experiment that had taken place during the 1920s and which consisted in organizing meetings between citizens and writers everywhere in the USSR. The common feature of these programs was the possibility of a meeting between the people and the writers, from which the writers would draw true inspiration from the workers (in the spirit of socialist realism), and through which the workers, the people, would develop a love of reading— and the ability to reject the bad books of popular literature. The leadership of the PCF

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gave its support to Triolet’s plan in 1949 because of the launching of the International Movement for Peace by the Kominform, a propaganda and information organisation of the USSR and its allies created in 1949. The French “Bataille du Livre”—the Battle of the Book—lasted over two years, from March 1950 to June 1952. Fifteen meetings were organised. There was an audience, but the events were reserved for Communist writers and militants. The mainstream media ignored these events, maybe purposefully. When the Movement for Peace ceased to be important, the PCF stopped supporting this initiative.

In a way, this extraordinary experience—the first event of such scope in the world of French publishing—was a failure. French publishers had chosen modernity: they endorsed new forms of publication, inspired by North American marketing and by new consumer habits—Reader’s Digest was very successful in France, the paperback, the “livre de poche,” was launched in 1953 by Hachette, and books started to be sold in department stores in 1954. Mass culture inspired by American models had been flourishing since the Liberation. Although the failure was not total, it shocked the few Communist intellectuals and many Party members. Despite the survival of French Stalinist culture—Maurice Thorez died in 1964—the Party adopted less sectarian approaches to reading. Did it mean that books, becoming less dangerous, would also become less important in political life?


The cultural opening was far from complete, and above all remained ambiguous in the mind of the leadership, even after 1964. As far as the latter was concerned, intellectual debates were interesting because they could attract new elites into the Party. But the main goal was to maintain control over the working class. Was the book still the right propaganda medium in the French society of the 1960s? The Socialist Party had given up its publishing house in 1947, after the Liberation. Moreover, from the end of the 1940s, the PCF schools had published their textbooks themselves. For the Communist publishers (Guy Besse at Editions sociales since 1955, and Madeleine Braun for the EFR since 1961) there was no doubt: both as true publishing professionals and as Communists, they thought they should publish books that the “bourgeois” publishers refused to publish. But in both cases, the fates were against them. Thanks to young talented translators,


Editions sociales succeeded in putting out reference works, mainly new translations of Marx’s works, while a new audience of teachers and students was emerging and Marxism was making headway in the French academic world. But the “bourgeois” publishing houses exploited this new opportunity as well. For instance, Gallimard and the editor Maximilien Rubel from 1963 published the complete works of Marx in a new translation, in the prestigious series La Bibliothèque de la Pléiade. They also published many essays about Marx and Marxism, which the Editions sociales could not accept because of their political position. This impossible position prompted the most brilliant Communist intellectual of the time, Louis Althusser, to bring his manuscripts to a new political publisher, François Maspero: Pour Marx and Lire le Capital were published in 1965. Another consequence of this lack of flexibility was that the Communist publishing houses did not publish the most famous anti-colonialist texts, one of which was written by a Communist: La Question by Henri Alleg was published by Editions de Minuit in 1957. In 1969, a recent recruit, Lucien Sève, was picked as the new head of Editions sociales. He tried to make up for lost time, publishing essays and going on with the translation of Marxist works. But by the middle of the 1970s the sales of Marxist books were dropping.

The history of the EFR is even more tragic. Because of the lack of support of the leadership, Aragon decided in 1955 to step down and transfer power over the EFR to young François Monod, a Communist and former employee of the Hachette Publishing group. After Monod’s death in an accident in 1961, he was replaced by Madeleine Braun. Both discovered the true cause of the EFR’s problems, and their inability to fight it. First, Aragon had stayed on as the de facto publisher of the EFR, and kept making decisions. He was acting as a go-between with the French publishing world, discovering writers, choosing the manuscripts and distributing them among a number of publishing companies. For example, he stopped accepting Soviet novels but won the assent of the PCF leadership for the

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28 Pour Marx is a selection of Althusser’s papers, and Lire le Capital is the result of a workshop at École normale supérieure (Paris), in which his students such as Etienne Balibar and Pierre Macherey participated. See Julien Hage, “Feltrinelli, Maspero, Wagenbach: une nouvelle génération d’éditeurs politiques d’extrême gauche en Europe occidentale, 1955–1982: histoire comparée, histoire croisée” (PhD diss., Université de Versailles–Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines, 2010).


creation of another series by Gallimard, Litteratures soviétiques, in 1957. Monod, then Braun, also discovered that young French writers refused to be published by the EFR because of insufficient sales and a very real lack of recognition. By the end of the 1960s, the catalogue was comprised mainly of dead authors, and was quite thin (twenty titles in 1970 compared to thirty-four for Editions sociales).

On the other hand, La Farandole and the Cercle d’art had succeeded in elaborating an editorial policy. La Farandole, thanks to Madeleine Gilard then Regine Lilensten, had built a brilliant catalogue of children’s books, most in a realist style that was both militant and original.\(^{32}\) The Cercle d’art, managed by Charles Feld from 1950 to 1981, succeeded in answering its new readership’s requirements, getting away from exclusive reproductions from Soviet museums in favour of monographs on painters, classical and modern. These two houses succeeded because the PCF leadership didn’t interfere: it didn’t care. The situation of the Editions sociales and the EFR was very different. The PCF considered that while they were not central to its policy, they could be useful. The consequence of this opportunist and conservative attitude was that publishers were prevented from taking the initiative.

What was the part played by books in French Communist propaganda from the point of view of the PCF leadership? The book remained a strong cultural symbol. Proof of this lies in the many books written by Party leaders from the beginning of the 1960s; before this period, they did not write much because of the priority given to Soviet comrades, then to Maurice Thorez’s works in the French catalogue. But these books were mostly published by “bourgeois” publishing houses. Even for the PCF leaders, the publishing houses of the Party came up short on prestige and commercial impact. In the same way, gradually, the book lost its role in Communist propaganda. It had always come second in comparison to the newspaper and periodical press. During the 1960s, it lost rank to a new medium: television.

The PCF had always used modern technology for its propaganda: in addition to books, newspapers, posters and leaflets, it had resorted to music, songs, plays, and above all the cinema. This is why it needed artists. It had shown interest in the new mass media as well. Radio became an important medium during the 1930s, and the Socialists and Communists discovered this with the first political campaign broadcast in 1932.\(^{33}\) But while radio became a mass medium after World War II, it remained under the close control of the government. France discovered television in 1949, but the spread of this medium was late (in the 1960s) compared to the USA or Great Britain. Also closely controlled by the government, television wasn’t pluralist, and the political opposition was forbidden access to it until


According to the archives of the PCF leadership, Communist leaders were fascinated by this forbidden medium. For all French political parties, the turning point came with the campaign for the presidential election of 1965: for the first time, TV became accessible to the opposition. Eventually, for every political figure, TV became the medium. This was true for the PCF as well.

From the 1970s, the PCF—which was able to attract twenty to twenty-five percent of the electorate—had at its disposal a press group, a number of publishing houses, a record company, a press delivery service, and a network of bookshops (Librairies de la Renaissance française, a dozen shops from 1945 on). It also controlled many city councils (for instance, in the suburbs of Paris, the “banlieue rouge”) and still wielded influence in the cultural world. From 1972, the alliance with the Socialist Party, led by François Mitterand, gave a new hope for victory and a role in government, which came to pass in 1981. The political situation was positive, but not enough to boost sales. The main publishers—Lucien Sève and Madeleine Braun—were feeling rather lonely in their fight for the survival of their companies. The PCF created a new group in 1981, Messidor (only Cercle d’art remained apart). Witnesses were struck by the bizarre behaviour of the PCF leadership: more interested in the press and broadcasting, it still agreed to finance an activity in which it didn’t believe anymore. Indeed, it chose to let its publishing group become outsized.

During the 1980s, the Messidor Group was unable to weather three crises: the crisis of the leftist parties, and above all the collapse of the PCF; the crisis of Marxism that had emerged since the middle of the 1970s; and, last but not least, the collapse of the USSR. The Messidor Group (with 220 employees and 200 titles published per year) went into receivership in 1993, and the bankruptcy was confirmed in 1994.

This history can be read as a metaphor for the replacement of one medium by another, of the book by the TV screen, of propaganda by political communication and marketing, of reading by broadcasting. But the ambiguous behaviour of the French Communist leaders is also notable. From the 1960s on, they supported a medium in which otherwise they seemed no longer to believe. Despite everything, books remained an important symbolic tool. Through books, political ideas become ideology, a system of thought. Through the press and the TV screen, political ideas became mass communication.

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