

SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

# IR's Roads to Freedom: Rereading Jean-Paul Sartre's trilogy as an International Relations text

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## Abstract

Jean-Paul Sartre's trilogy *Roads to Freedom* is written against the backdrop of the crises between 1938 and 1940 that led to war and the Fall of France. In this article I argue that *Roads to Freedom* can be read as an IR text, and I concentrate on four areas. First, a refocusing on the international relations of the everyday. Second, the anatomy of a crisis from an existentialist viewpoint that can enrich our understanding of crises. Third how the interactions of the main characters reveal the 'mediation of estrangement' at the heart of diplomacy, first explored by Der Derian in his 1987 *On Diplomacy*. Fourth, it calls into question our emphasis in IR on the centrality of causes to understand a crisis. Rather, *Roads to Freedom* refocuses our gaze on the diverse effects in everyday IR. The argument of the article is interwoven with my own experiences reading the trilogy for the first time, and how it influenced my decision to study IR.

**Keywords:** Jean-Paul Sartre; Roads to Freedom; Nuclear War; 1980s IR

## *Roads to Freedom ... roads to International Relations (1938–40); (1980–2)*

'I have attained the age of reason.' So ends the last line in the first book of Jean-Paul Sartre's trilogy *Roads to Freedom*. I first read the trilogy as a teenager after my parents moved to the Netherlands. The first book, *The Age of Reason*, I found on my parent's bookshelves. The other two – *The Reprieve* and *Iron in the Soul* – I read on long train and ferry journeys between my new home in the Netherlands and my comprehensive high school in my old home in the UK.<sup>1</sup> At a time before smartphones, laptops, and Wi-Fi, the main requirement for a book on a long journey (for me at least) was that it was long and dense enough to survive many hours of reading. Existential fiction already has its appeals for many teenagers, but for a teenager crossing an international boundary between two different worlds 12 times a year – both places 'home', but also strangely foreign when viewed through the lens of the other 'home' – they seemed to speak to me and to my own personal relationship with one aspect of international relations.

One of the themes I will explore in this article is the question of luck, and it was luck that led me to *The Age of Reason*. Sitting amidst half-unpacked boxes in a new house in an unfamiliar country I found an anthology of literature about cats. Included in it was the scene in *The Age of Reason* where Daniel eventually decides not to drown his cats. I was drawn to read the extract since I thought that the reference to the *Age of Reason* meant it was set in the seventeenth or

<sup>1</sup>Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Age of Reason* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 2016 [orig. pub. 1945]); Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Reprieve* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1963 [orig. pub. 1947]); Jean-Paul Sartre, *Iron in the Soul* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1963 [orig. pub. 1949]).

eighteenth centuries (I was interested in history). The story was not what I expected, but the title of the book stuck in my mind. Later, searching my parents' books for something to read (the other option was watching one of two Dutch channels on the grainy black-and-white television we had picked up locally), I came across an old orange and white Penguin edition of *The Age of Reason*. Why not? I already had got over my disappointment that it was set in the twentieth century when I read the earlier extract (although I was glad to know that Daniel's cats would live). And so I was sucked into Sartre's world.

*Roads to Freedom* consists of three books. *The Age of Reason*, set in 1938 follows the main character, Mathieu, as he attempts to find the money to fund his lover's abortion. Behind the interactions of the characters hangs the shadow of impending war. *The Reprieve* takes place during the Munich negotiations in September 1938, and mixes the lives of the original characters from the first book with a large number of other characters both fictional and real. The narrative jumps between characters and settings without warning, with action from one storyline flowing into another often in mid-sentence. Fictional stories are mixed with fictional recreations of diplomatic events. *Iron in the Soul*, the final book, jumps to the fall of France in 1940. The number of characters is reduced, with the focus returning to the major figures from the first book. While the longer first part covers a range of characters as they come to terms with defeat, the short second part is written without paragraph breaks, and tells the story of Brunet's experience as a prisoner of war.

Scarily, it is forty years since I first read *Roads to Freedom*. I really did not realise I was that old, and unlike the character of Mathieu, I am not sure if I have yet attained the age of reason. While I have a hazy earlier memory of watching the final scene of the (now lost?) 1970s BBC adaptation of the trilogy, it was reading the books that stood out in my memory, and while rereading I was surprised at how much I remembered. I read the trilogy forty years after the events described in the books, so strangely my teenage self is now equidistant between the world described by Sartre and the world in which I am writing this article. It is also interesting to note (as I did at the time) that Sartre died in 1980 during my original reading of *Roads to Freedom*. While a contemporary connection, I had read enough Sartre by then to know that it was nothing more than a coincidence. What emerged from my second reading was an across-time conversation between these three points in time.

My rereading relates to IR in two ways. Intellectually, I want to explore how Sartre and his characters engage with the epoch-defining world events that permeate all three books. Here the interplay between the personal lives of the characters and the global events of 1938–40 provides a fine-grained view of International Relations (IR). Autobiographically, though, it is also an exploration of my own journey towards specialising in IR. I read the books while experiencing my own interactions with international and transnational forces, and within a year or two I would shift my university applications from archaeology to IR programmes. While the trilogy focuses on the interplay between personal lives and the events of 1938–40, I read the books against my own personal interactions with the international. Whether reading the books were a cause or a symptom of my changing interests that would lead me to IR is a question I cannot answer. All I can say is that any evaluation by me of the trilogy in an IR context cannot be separated from my own experiences between 1980 and 1983. Thus, to a certain extent, what follows is my contribution to the study of the IR of the everyday.

Sartre's treatment of international events refocuses them as things that happen to us in the here and now. I remember once being at an IR panel where a friend was presenting on levels of political economy. His hand would move to the top of his head as he talked about the global level, move to the level of his neck when discussing the state, and close to the table when talking about individual experiences. Sartre's narrative breaks down this idea of 'levels of analysis'. Instead, the international does not happen 'out there'. Rather, it reaches into our own experiences, and in some cases (like the torture Mathieu goes through about not being in Spain fighting fascism) into our souls. This, of course, is something that has been addressed by recent moves to explore

the IR (and the IPE) of the everyday, especially through feminist lenses.<sup>2</sup> Sartre's use of it shows that this approach is not new, and that rereadings of *Roads to Freedom* has something to offer to studies of IR of the everyday. Indeed, my own experience outlined in this article is an addition to this literature.

*Roads to Freedom* is also an exploration of the use of fiction to understand political events. Again, this is not without precedent in IR. The field's recent narrative turn has included arguments that fictional writing can bring the power of imagination to bear, especially where there is a lack of information.<sup>3</sup> Along similar lines, Kathryn Starnes has argued for the use of folklore in IR.<sup>4</sup> Yet, a rereading of *Roads to Freedom* is not just useful as a contribution to the narrative turn, Sartre himself had a particular view of the political role of fiction that is useful for IR to consider.<sup>5</sup> For Sartre, all prose was political because it attempted to reflect truth, so it was best to be honest about the political message. Through fiction a writer offers a guide, but it is the reader who does the hard work of interpretation and evaluation that completes the work. Thus, from one angle, we can treat *Roads to Freedom* as a guide, written by Sartre, for understanding the truths behind the crisis of 1938–40. From another, the juxtaposition of the trilogy with my own experience of reading it between 1980 and 1982 is also an adumbration of how I, as the reader, interpreted Sartre's guide during a crucial time of my political development as I turned towards IR as my chosen field of study.

On top of this, *Roads to Freedom* is an anatomy of a foreign policy crisis. In the second book (*The Reprieve*) major diplomatic actors even appear as characters woven into the rag quilt of a story that abandons the clear narrative of the first book. Importantly, though, the third book (*Iron in the Soul*) takes us through the fall of France. Commonly, Anglophone analyses of the crises that led to war end in 1939 with the declarations of war on Germany following the invasion of Poland. Sartre skips 1939, and takes us straight from Munich to the fall of France. While 1940 is a crucial and traumatic date for France and the French, the trauma of 1940 is often glossed over by Anglophone views of the war. With the exceptions of the Battle of Britain and the 'Britain fighting alone' trope, 1940 usually takes second place to the declaration of war in 1939 and Pearl Harbor in 1941. Yet, as the historian David Reynolds has pointed out, 1940 is the year that changed the nature of the war, and the trauma of the French collapse (along with the Benelux countries) is an event that reshaped relations not just in Europe, but across the globe. Sartre's ignoring of 1939, and focusing on Munich in 1938 and the fall of France in 1940 gives us a different prism in which to view the crisis of the late 1930s.<sup>6</sup> Sartre also invites us to see the crisis in a different light. Dropping causes for the multitude of effects, while underscoring the role of luck in both private and political life, Sartre's presentation of an international crisis offers fresh insights to IR, as I will argue below.

There are four themes I will be exploring. The first is the juxtaposition of the trilogy with my own experiences and choices four decades after the events in which the book was set; the second

<sup>2</sup>For the IR of the everyday, see the contributions to the special forum in *International Political Sociology*, 5:4 (2011), pp. 446–62; Ty Solomon and Brent J. Steele, 'Micro-moves in International Relations theory', *European Journal of International Relations*, 23:2 (2016), pp. 267–91; Christine Sylvester, *Feminist International Relations: An Unfinished Journey* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002); and Annika Björkdahl, Martin Hall, and Ted Svensson, 'Everyday International Relations: Editors' introduction', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 54:2 (2019), pp. 123–30 (see also the contributions to the Special Issue that the article introduces). On the IPE of everyday life, see the I-PEEL initiative found at: {<http://i-peeel.org/>} accessed 11 October 2022.

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, Sunju Park-Kang, 'Fictional IR and imagination: Advancing narrative approaches', *Review of International Studies*, 41 (2015), pp. 361–81.

<sup>4</sup>Kathryn Starnes, 'The case for creative folklore in pedagogical practice', *Art & the Public Sphere*, 10:2 (2021), pp. 225–32. See also Kathryn Starnes, *Fairy Tales and International Relations: A Folklorist Reading of IR Textbooks* (London, UK: Taylor & Francis, 2016).

<sup>5</sup>For the full text of his argument on prose and politics, see Jean-Paul Sartre, *What is Literature? And Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988 [orig. pub. 1946]).

<sup>6</sup>David Reynolds, *From World War to Cold War* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2006), ch. 2.

is the interweaving of IR with the everyday within the trilogy itself; the third is how Sartre's take helps us to reimagine a particular foreign policy crisis; and the fourth is how Sartre's interpretation of the interactions between his protagonists closely follows classic views of diplomacy in international thought. While the first will be worked into all sections of the article, the second, third, and fourth themes will be explored each in their own section. Underlying these four themes, though, is the nagging question of why, despite all that Sartre seems to offer, that there is no existential IR? Perhaps, and from a more personal angle, if *Roads to Freedom* influenced my turn to IR, why have I never cited it until now?

As a final introductory note, while rereading the trilogy I realised that to do justice to it as an International Relations text I should also write the article in a way that copied elements of the style of the books. This includes a first-person style that mirrors Sartre's incorporation of the thoughts of his characters (particularly those of the main protagonist Mathieu), and a tendency for scenes to blend into each other as a way of establishing connections between apparently disparate vignettes (an approach that dominates the second book). In so doing I have tried to combine the style of the books with the conventions of writing in IR in such a way that the reader also gets a flavour of the trilogy. This also fits part of the concern of this Special Issue, which is to explore the idea of an existentialist IR. For this to work we would first need to get used to writing IR in a way compatible with existentialism.

**'This is going to end badly', thought Mathieu ... his life, Europe, this ineffectual peace.<sup>7</sup>**

Cinematographically, *Roads to Freedom* is a slow-motion trainwreck. In the first book, the characters, but especially the main protagonist Mathieu, live their lives against the backdrop of an increasingly unstable world heading towards another major war. They are able to carry on their lives with little reference to the looming clouds of crisis, but every now and then it intrudes into their thinking, only to be brushed aside by more pressing issues. In the second book Sartre increases the number of protagonists, and now includes those outside of Paris, of France, and of fiction. Statesmen of the time find their narratives rubbing shoulders with fictional private citizens. Here everyday personal narratives are interwoven with the crisis itself, to the extent that some lines seem to belong to more than one of the stories being told. Finally, the crisis breaks over all the personal narratives in the final book, overwhelming them in a flood that none of the characters are able to avoid. Only Brunet, the committed communist, is able to see any meaning in the cascading events, thanks to his ideological stance. Yet, the question of whether he sees clearly, or is just finding comfort in seeing order where none exists, is not resolved.

There is a fourth *Roads to Freedom* book, put together by two writers using Sartre's notes and papers, although its publication begs the question of whether Sartre had good reason not to publish it. Sartre was famous for starting projects that were never finished, and was also disinclined to bring his narratives to a definitive conclusion. There may, therefore, be a good reason why the original trilogy was published, and the fourth book was not. The story that Sartre is telling does not need a conclusion. These are roads to freedom, not a road, and a conclusion would assume that the crisis, and the lives of the characters caught up in it, need/want/have a conclusion. In a sense, and compatible with Sartre's view of literature, should conclusions not be left to the reader? Certainly, from the point of the second book, there can be no clear tying together of the narratives because these are all very personal stories that share the time in which they are set, not a master coherence. The crisis, which I will discuss in the next section, does not impose any coherence, because that is not what crises do. A crisis, by its nature, is a clash of multiple narratives. Here *The Reprieve* (the second book) is the most enlightening and confusing in its interweaving of these multiple stories.

Another source has claimed that Sartre abandoned the fourth book because, in a world threatened by nuclear war, Sartre understood the concerns of late 1930s war as no longer relevant (see

<sup>7</sup>Sartre, *The Age of Reason*, p. 304.

Ben Zala's article in this Special Issue). War in 1981 was different. 'I've never known a year to start so badly.' We had just welcomed in the new year, and 1981 was only minutes old. My father was not talking about our family fortunes, which were prospering after a move to a new country. He was talking about the current state of global affairs and the world economy. There was also an international crisis unfolding in slow motion. In 1979 the Soviets had invaded Afghanistan, setting in play a series of events that would lead to the US refusing to ratify the SALT II treaty on nuclear arms control. The revolution in Iran, and the occupation of the United States embassy in Tehran, led to a hostage crisis that undermined the credibility of the Carter Administration. In November 1980 Carter had lost the presidential election to Ronald Reagan. Reagan's campaign had openly called for a more confrontational approach to the Soviet Union, and while Reagan proved less of a hawk than his campaign persona showed, his belligerent rhetoric during his campaign and first term led the Soviet leadership to believe that the West was planning a pre-emptive nuclear strike. Worsening East–West relations would dominate the early 1980s. These tensions came to a head in 1983, when a routine NATO command exercise, Able Archer, was misinterpreted by the Soviets as a cover to launch an unprovoked attack. Into this witch's brew would be added the Soviet shooting down of a Korean airliner in Soviet airspace, and a false alarm showing inbound US missiles which only did not lead to an accidental nuclear war because the Soviet officer on watch chose to ignore his computer.<sup>8</sup> Interwoven here is the issue of luck, especially bad luck and coincidences that appear to be causes but turn out not to be. I will return to this issue of luck later in Sartre's anatomy of a crisis. The potential results of a nuclear war, whether intended or not, had been (literally) graphically displayed to us in 1982 by Raymond Briggs's graphic novel *When the Wind Blows*.<sup>9</sup> On those long transnational journeys between school and home, with one of the *Roads to Freedom* books on my lap, I had plenty of time to mull over the threat that East–West tensions posed to the fragile life decisions I was making, and to empathise with characters facing their own oncoming crisis.

'Nothing can deprive my life of meaning', claimed Brunet in *The Age of Reason*.<sup>10</sup> Mathieu admires Brunet's communist faith, and the way that the Party both gives his life meaning and saves Brunet from having to think. Brunet sees beyond Mathieu's bourgeois life, he even sees beyond the fighting in Spain, to see a logical world that makes sense. The threat of nuclear war in the early 1980s had the same internal logic, and even its own language, as revealed by Carol Cohn in her 1987 article 'Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals'.<sup>11</sup> At the level of acronyms and nuclear strategy it all made sense. Yet, when we took time to think about the consequences for the numerous individual stories – as Briggs did in his graphic novel, or film did with 1983's *The Day After* and 1984's *Threads* – the clinical logic of the defence intellectual resembled madness. It might also be interpreted as 'bad faith' arguments, in the sense both De Beauvoir and Sartre used it to mean a self-deception where someone uses their freedom to deny their freedom. The defence intellectuals, in this sense, used their intellectual freedom to encase themselves in a logical world that protected them from the freedom to understand the ghastly realities of nuclear war. The logic of a global crisis, whether in 1938 or 1983, might be rational, but it was not reasonable.<sup>12</sup>

*The Reprieve* explores this theme of the meaning of a crisis over many lives, and in so doing demolishes the idea that a crisis can have only one logic. So often in IR we see a crisis as a depopulated landscape, where the architecture of the crisis is present in clear mathematical lines, but devoid of people. An analogue here might be *The Ideal City* in the Galleria

<sup>8</sup>See Jill Kastner, 'Standing on the brink: The secret war scare of 1983', *The Nation* (31 May 2018).

<sup>9</sup>Raymond Briggs, *When the Wind Blows* (London, UK: Penguin, 1983).

<sup>10</sup>Sartre, *The Age of Reason*, p. 152.

<sup>11</sup>Carol Cohn, 'Sex and death in the rational world of defense intellectuals', *Signs*, 12:4 (1987), pp. 687–718.

<sup>12</sup>See Paul Erickson, Judy L. Klein, Lorraine Daston, Rebecca Lemov, Thomas Sturm, and Michael D. Gordin, *How Reason Almost Lost Its Mind: The Strange Career of Cold War Rationality* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2013).

Nazionale delle Marche, Urbino.<sup>13</sup> The mathematical logic of the painting contrasts with the emptiness of the city itself. The city is perfectly laid out, but there are no people on its perfectly straight and symmetrical streets. Those who live in this logical world might dismiss Briggs or the two films as nothing more than anecdotal stories told for entertainment. Yet, like *The Reprieve*, Briggs's graphic novel, *The Day After*, and *Threads* play the role of populating a crisis with people, and thus provide an understanding that is missing from Cohn's defence intellectuals. As forms of prose they are, in Sartrean terms, attempts to understand truth through a fictional recreation of a possible future. Here, they reveal the truths that the language of the defence intellectuals obscure.

Rather, *The Reprieve* invites us to see the multiple realities of the Munich crisis from the point of view of a range of individuals, and in this respect it shares the everyday viewpoint found in films and literature on nuclear war in the early 1980s. Some characters we might be tempted to dismiss as just ignorant of the reality they face (think here also of Briggs' protagonists seeing nuclear war as akin to the Second World War), but the stories the characters tell in *The Reprieve* reveal disconnected truths that the dry exploration of the crisis hides. At the opposite end of the spectrum of meaning from Brunet, who knows he knows, is the character of Ivich, who knows she does not. Or, rather, she knows it is serious, but struggles to know why it is all happening. More basically, she worries that she does not know where Czechoslovakia is (a fascinating contrast to Chamberlain's infamous definition of the Czechoslovak crisis as a 'quarrel in a far-away country, between people of whom we know nothing'). She asks Mathieu, who brings down his atlas, and turns the page to central Europe. Except, as Ivich notices, Czechoslovakia is not there. Mathieu explains that the atlas is prewar, and Czechoslovakia was not founded yet. The ephemeral nature of borders is underscored by Austria-Hungary occupying the space in the atlas where Czechoslovakia should now be. He takes a fountain pen and draws in the boundaries. Ivich has real concerns about the disasters the war brings, and when she goes to explore why terrible things are about to rain down on her life she is shown an ephemeral world of shifting borders.

The borders, though, have a very real existence for Milan and Anna, Czechs marooned in a predominantly German part of the Sudetenland, and fellow characters in *The Reprieve*. A rock is thrown through their window by a passing parade of Sudeten Germans, and they sit listening to the wireless, hoping to hear that the French will be coming to their rescue. Both Ivich in France and the couple in Bohemia are victims of the abstract logic of the crisis, but in starkly different ways. In Ivich's case the ephemeral existence of the border is an unreality that threatens to upturn her world, for Milan and Anna the abstract talks about the border between Germany and Czechoslovakia stumbles through their lived reality of border living. In both cases the hyperreality of the crisis is in conflict with two different lived experiences. Here we also see how effortlessly fiction is able to embrace pluralism and micropolitics.<sup>14</sup>

Interestingly, there is a contemporary IR text that does try to do something similar to Sartre's fine-grained take on the Czechoslovak crisis, but without the benefit of fictional recreation. In 1938 Elizabeth Wiskemann, the British journalist and later to be Montague Burton Professor of International Relations at Edinburgh, wrote a book for Chatham House on the roots and current state of the Czech-German conflict in Bohemia. Wiskemann's account, based on her extensive fieldwork, mixes historical detail with first-hand accounts of the places she visited.<sup>15</sup> Set beside E. H. Carr's more top-down analysis of the Munich crisis in the first edition (only) of his *Twenty Years' Crisis*,<sup>16</sup> Wiskemann's *Czechs and Germans* gives an account of the different and competing realities in the Bohemian Crown Lands, making clear that the simple partition of the country, as advocated by Carr and the supporters of Munich, translated into bigger

<sup>13</sup>See {<http://www.gallerianazionalemarche.it/collezioni-gnm/citta-ideale/>} accessed 11 October 2022.

<sup>14</sup>See Solomon and Steele, 'Micro-moves in International Relations theory'.

<sup>15</sup>Elizabeth Wiskemann, *Czechs and Germans: A Study of the Struggle in the Historic Provinces of Bohemia and Moravia* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1938).

<sup>16</sup>E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis* (London, UK: Macmillan, 1939).

problems on the ground. Like Sartre's irreconcilable narratives in *The Reprieve*, Wiskemann summed up the evidence of her many interviews by arguing that in 'the circumstances of Europe to-day the problem of the Historic Provinces [of the Bohemian Crown] cannot be satisfactorily solved'.<sup>17</sup> Her account of a train journey through a cross-section of the country shows how Wiskemann combined factual prose with narrative recreation:

To most people the gateway to Bohemia is certainly the Tetschen-Bodenbach (Děčín-Podmokly) Castle, which rises to one's left if one travels south from Dresden along the Elbe by train ... The people do not look nor speak very differently from their neighbours in the German Reich, and yet Austria has left her mark, her attitude to life. And what is that? Something Catholic, something faintly cosmopolitan, more than racial anyway. Something to do with really good coffee with whipped cream served with hand-kisses ... Tetschen is the old town here and Bodenbach the new; together they are fairly characteristic – industrial though small, with a socialist tradition and a sprinkling of Czechs among the metal-workers. And in a moment one is out and away into a fairy-story landscape with steep hills and pine forests and old, delighting villages, and then down to that lovely Elbe valley again ... It is easy to understand why young Sudeten Germans who are all for Hitler and hate the Czechs will still sometimes tell you they could have kissed the Czech officials at the frontier all the same, when they came home last time.<sup>18</sup>

Wiskeman's train journey, with its hints of tranquillity before a crisis, shares the experiences of Sartre's protagonists. That sense of calm hiding tectonic plates of a coming crisis is present in the late 1930s, the early 1980s, and now. In the 1984 film *The Terminator* the final scene sees the scriptwriters play off the double meaning of a storm coming. While Sarah Connor prepares for the coming storm (a crisis caused by preparations for nuclear war that ironically cause the thing it is meant to prevent) a small boy points to the sky. 'He says there's a storm coming.' 'I know.' In the 1930s that storm would be heralded by the arrival of the bomber (as in H. G. Wells' 1936 film *Things to Come*, where he imagines the declaration of war being followed hours later by a bombing campaign that destroys cities) and retroactively for Sartre by *Blitzkrieg*. In the early 1980s Bombers and *Blitzkrieg* were replaced with MIRVed ICBMs destroying the world in a matter of hours, like Wells' bombers; while in the early 2000s that threat of apocalypse has moved from the military products of human-on-human power politics, to the undermining of the Earth system through human relations with the non-human ecology. Yet, our present has not escaped the shadow of the bomber and the ICBM entirely, as the war in Ukraine in 2022 once again opens up the possibility of the use of nuclear weapons.

### Tomorrow the blackbirds would come.<sup>19</sup>

The crisis of the late 1930s holds an important place in IR's self-image. It is sometimes presented as the victory of realism over idealism (which it isn't),<sup>20</sup> and was frequently resuscitated during the Cold War as an argument against expanding détente (the improvement of relations between the United States and the Soviet Union). In this largely Anglophone demonology, appeasement became the evil policy, and the fall of France was the warning about overly defensive unpreparedness. This trope was not just restricted to IR, but could be found throughout the West, especially in the cultural output of the United States. In 1978 the original film version of *Battlestar Galactica*

<sup>17</sup>Wiskemann, *Czechs and Germans*, p. 283.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., pp. 97–8.

<sup>19</sup>Sartre, *The Reprieve*, p. 349.

<sup>20</sup>See Brian Schmidt, *International Relations and the First Great Debate* (London, UK: Routledge, 2012); and Cecelia Lynch, *Beyond Appeasement: Interpreting Interwar Peace Movements in World Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007).

recreated this trope for cinemagoers. Peace-loving humans, in a conflict with a society of robots (Cylons), are taken in by a supposed peace treaty. In a thinly disguised version of the idea of the window of vulnerability for US nuclear forces that helped Ronald Reagan get elected, a preemptive strike by the Cylons against the human colonies finds the humans ill-prepared, and the humans suffer a defeat. A warning about Soviet intentions in the dying days of détente, it was also a story that drew freely from common perceptions of the crisis of the 1930s. Indeed, those intellectuals in the Committee on the Present Danger (CPD), that gave scholarly support to Reagan's campaign, were of a generation that remembered the previous crisis that had led to war.<sup>21</sup>

I remained unconvinced by the *Battlestar Galactica* take on the balance of terror that we lived under. For a start, the view of the United States as peace loving seemed increasingly at odds with the new Reagan administration that had taken over in 1981 after winning an election on the idea that the United States had fallen behind the USSR militarily, and was vulnerable to a surprise attack by Soviet nuclear weapons. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan very quickly appeared to be a blunder, rather than a clever first strike, and reports on Soviet weaponry at the time seemed to suggest that the numerical inferiority of the West's ground forces in Europe was matched by a superiority in both troops and materiel (the family resemblance to Russian military failures in its war with Ukraine in 2022 stand out here too). Yet, spending half my life in continental Europe meant that I was frequently living in the path of a future Warsaw Pact invasion of Western Europe. One of the books I read during my early days in the Netherlands (it was one of the few English-language works in the local bookshop) was General Sir John Hackett's *The Third World War*.<sup>22</sup> A fictionalised account of a war between East and West, I could not help noticing that in the maps Hackett had of the shifting frontline of conventional warfare in Europe, the small town in the north of the Netherlands that I was living in would be in Soviet hands within days. The chance that I would share the same fate as Sartre's characters in the final book of *Roads to Freedom* – rolled over by the political crisis of my day through a swift invasion by conventional forces – was never far from my mind as I read *Iron in the Soul*.

Yet, from an IR perspective, the transition between *The Reprieve* and *Iron in the Soul* is important for what it does not say. What is not said puts into focus what is said.<sup>23</sup> The big silence is 1939. Sartre jumps from the trauma of a war scare to the horror of defeat without that intervening step of actually going to war. This is, perhaps, because for the lives of the people that interest Sartre the declaration of war is less important. The coming of war in 1939 is foretold within the pages of the first two books, and while at one level this can be criticised as postwar hindsight, there is a sense that Sartre was catching a mood in France and in other quarters. While the July crisis of 1914 caught so many in Europe (as well as the wider world) by surprise, the start of the Second World War in Europe had been foretold in the many crises, rearming programmes, and diplomatic actions since the mid-1930s. Even as early as 1936 George Orwell in his semi-autobiographical novel *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* has his protagonist half wishing for the coming bombers of the next war.<sup>24</sup> Staying on the British side of the Channel, British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, despite his image as a crusader for peace with Germany, had made it clear to those around him after Munich that a war was coming. Indeed, in the car from Heston aerodrome – between the 'piece of paper' and 'peace of our time' speeches – Chamberlain said to his foreign secretary 'this will all be over in three months', referring to the fragile peace.<sup>25</sup> This view of Chamberlain knowing exactly what is happening is recreated in the Netflix dramatisation *Munich: The Edge of War*, based on Robert Harris's novel. In

<sup>21</sup>On the CPD, see Simon Dalby, *Creating the Second Cold War* (London, UK: Pinter, 1990).

<sup>22</sup>John Hackett, *The Third World War: August 1985* (London, UK: Macmillan, 1978).

<sup>23</sup>On silence in IR, see Sophia Dingli, 'We need to talk about silence: Re-examining silence in International Relations theory', *European Journal of International Relations*, 21:4 (2015), pp. 721–42.

<sup>24</sup>George Orwell, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (London, UK: Victor Gollancz, 1936).

<sup>25</sup>Richard Overy, *The Road to War* (London, UK: Vintage, 2009), p. 123.



both the novel and the film the reader/viewer is confronted with a demolition of the simple story of appeasement found among foreign policy hawks in the 1970s and early 1980s (and in *Battlestar Galactica*).

Indeed, the one world leader surprised by the outbreak of war the following year appears to be Hitler, who assumed that his brinkmanship over Poland would not lead to war. Famously, when Hitler was read the ultimatum from Britain there was complete silence as he stared out the window. After a few moments he turned to his Foreign Minister Ribbentrop with a savage look, and said 'what now?'.<sup>26</sup> Here, again, the plurality of a crisis is emphasised. When we turn from the common British and French focus to that of the German leadership we encounter a different story that challenges what we think we know. If Sartre had covered the 1939 crisis in the way that he covered 1938 in *The Reprieve* we can imagine him using this scene to good effect, in much the same way as he used the scene of the return of French premier Daladier from Munich to show that the politician's understanding of events was at odds with the contemporary popular view. Yet, since his main characters were unlikely to be as taken aback by war in 1939, it would have been a very slim and pale copy of the second book.

If 1939 was foreseen, 1940 was an unexpected shock. In 1939 Germany was isolated, facing a Britain and France that were rearmed and with the manpower of the two largest empires behind them. What is more, the Allies had captured the German plans of attack, and outdid the Germans on mechanisation. In this sense the offensive of May 1940 was a desperate gamble by the Germans, and the fact that it unexpectedly paid off – leading to the defeat of first the Netherlands, then Belgium, and finally France – stresses the importance of luck and happenstance in international affairs. Forced to change plans after an accident, the German armour then lost contact and continued to advance. The Allied counterattack fell victim to a lack of coordination, and an attack that should have been repulsed ended up as an unqualified success.<sup>27</sup> Sartre captures the effect of this sudden turn of events in *Iron in the Soul*, and backing for his view of 1940 as a cataclysmic watershed can be found in the work of the historian David Reynolds. Reynolds calls 1940 the fulcrum of the twentieth century, arguing that it changed the nature of the war, and set in motion events that would give the postwar world its character. This included the shift to an American dominated Western alliance, the centrality of decolonisation, the rise of the superpowers, and European integration.<sup>28</sup> After the war attempts were made to explain the events of 1940 in order to restore a logical and rational telling of the IR narrative.<sup>29</sup> Many of these built on the posthumous narrative of the French historian Marc Bloch in his *Strange Defeat*, who looked for the causes of defeat in *longue durée* cultural values, education, and social structures.<sup>30</sup> Later versions of this story would see in the Maginot Line a defeatist culture based on an outmoded sense of the superiority of the defensive war.

Sartre's narratives present a different history of 1940, where contingency and shock are central. Here his version of 1940 is of an event that is not explicable in terms of causes, but rather in outcomes. The shorter second part of the book, written in a single overlong paragraph, explores Brunet's experiences of being captured and held as a POW. His (bad?) faith in communism sustains him through the trauma, but the result is tragic for one of his fellow prisoners that he attempts to help. Brunet's story is one attempt to make sense of the trauma of 1940. Luck again intervenes, and a poorly timed attempt by one prisoner to escape shows the importance of timing in events, whether individual decisions or epochal ones.

<sup>26</sup>Overy, *The Road to War*, p. 81; Richard Overy, *1939: Countdown to War* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 2010), p. 97.

<sup>27</sup>See Julian Jackson, *The Fall of France: The Nazi Invasion of 1940* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>28</sup>Reynolds, *From World War to Cold War*, ch. 2.

<sup>29</sup>For a summary of how IR textbooks 'restore order' to the story by concentrating on the failures of the Allies to prepare, thus making 1940 seem inevitable, see Lucian M. Ashworth, *A History of International Thought* (London, UK: Routledge, 2014), pp. 184–97.

<sup>30</sup>Marc Bloch, *Strange Defeat: A Statement of Evidence Written in 1940* (New York, NY: Octagon, 1968)

I have never felt satisfied with IR's engagement with luck in events. Textbooks seem to thrive on retroactively turning past uncertainties into rational certainties through a process not dissimilar to Bloch's attempt to account for the French defeat. The 1914 July crisis becomes a royal road to war, Versailles is blamed for causing a second war it could never foresee, and reparations are made to carry a guilt the actual facts and figures of the case cannot bear. The resort to a glib 'Maginot Line syndrome', in this sense, is no different. The role of luck and chance was also always in the back of my mind as I read *Roads to Freedom* in the early eighties. Not only had a chance event – the moving of my parents to another country – changed my own trajectory, but the looming global crisis between East and West was made problematic by the question of chance. While the idea of nuclear strategy attempted to bring certainty to the balance of terror, luck remained a serious issue in a confrontation that rested on the potential for minutes worth of decision-making to make deterrence and Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) work. After all, we had all seen the classic nuclear crisis that played out in Stanley Kubrick's film *Dr. Strangelove*, where the incalculable madness of one officer led to the unthinkable nuclear showdown. As Henrik Bliddal put it in his assessment of the film as an IR text: 'the goal of absolute credibility is unachievable', and nothing can rule out something going wrong.<sup>31</sup>

What this leaves us with is a questioning of something that has often dominated IR attempts to understand world events: the search for causes. Rather, in Sartre's treatment of 1940 we are left without the comfort of cause, and instead are offered only a myriad of effects that fan out from an event on the backs of millions of different stories. As an aside, the two early 1980s nuclear war films, *The Morning After* and *Threads*, both minimised the question of the causes of the war, often reducing them to disjointed radio or television reports that are more confusing than illuminating. 'There's nowt we can do about it, is there?' one of the characters in *Threads* says referring to the television news on the growing crisis, 'might as well enjoy ourselves while we can.' The scene is not much different to those we find in *The Age of Reason*, where the lead up to war is a distant disjointed narrative that occasionally intrudes into the thoughts of the main characters. Interestingly, an analog of this crisis played out in the real world of the early 1980s' East–West confrontation: a stroke of luck would dominate the cause side of the balance sheet, while the effects would have been devastating and (rather than epoch defining) epoch ending. While we now know that an accidental war did not happen, we also know that in 1983, due to a computer error, it almost happened. We were brought up to see Soviet officers as almost robotic in their actions, controlled as they were by the organs of the Communist Party, yet it was an officer defying that stereotype – Lieutenant Colonel Stanislav Petrov – that in the end stood between us and our own much worse Iron in the Soul.

The 1983 film *Wargames* had already unknowingly riffed off the issue Petrov would face in that same year. The film starts with the premise that, in an exercise, too many of the human parts of the early warning and launch system of the United States are unwilling to ultimately launch their nuclear weapons. The answer was to hand it over to an emotionless computer. This then solves the reliability problem of the nuclear deterrent (a similar problem appears, on the Soviet side, with their doomsday machine in *Doctor Strangelove*). Except, as AI experts have warned us, the unhuman and psychopathic computer lacks an important human element.<sup>32</sup> Petrov was the main human circuit breaker in the Soviet computerised early warning system. His decision to ignore the computer on grounds of a very human gut analysis, and with only minutes to spare, underscores the limits of strategic credibility. Lieutenant Colonel Stanislav Petrov of the Soviet Air Defence Forces could have been a character in *Roads to Freedom*. His use of his freedom may have cost him his job, but it saved our lives.

<sup>31</sup>Henrik Bliddal, 'The joke's on you: International Relations and Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove*', in Henrik Bliddal, Casper Sylvest, and Peter Wilson (eds), *Classics of International Relations* (London, UK: Routledge, 2013), p. 124.

<sup>32</sup>Brendan Dixon, 'All AIs are psychopaths', *Mind Matters News* (16 March 2020), available at: {<https://mindmatters.ai/2020/03/all-ais-are-psychopaths/>} accessed 11 October 2022.

**‘Christ!’ he said out loud. ‘No one shall say we didn’t hold out for fifteen minutes!’<sup>33</sup>**

The longer first part of *Iron in the Soul* ends with one of the most dramatic scenes in the trilogy. Mathieu joins a small group of retreating French soldiers who have been given the order to hold up the German advance by fifteen minutes in the village that Mathieu and other soldiers (abandoned by their officers) wait to be captured. From a military point of view the gesture is pointless. The Germans have already won, and fifteen minutes was an insignificant amount of time (at least it was before the ICBM. Ironically it is about the same amount of time that Petrov needed in 1983 to determine if there really was a US missile strike, but then it appeared a very long time indeed). Yet, Mathieu finds meaning in it, and the efforts of the small group of French soldiers locked up in the church tower feels written in real time as one by one they are killed. By the end, only Mathieu is left, with half a minute until the fifteen minutes is up. He pours his frustrations with everything that has happened to him since the first book into the effort to make it to fifteen minutes.

He fired. He was cleansed. He was all-powerful. He was free.  
Fifteen minutes.<sup>34</sup>

Incidentally, this scene is the only one I can remember from the possibly now lost BBC dramatisation of *Roads to Freedom*, which aired when I was a child.

Despite being the kind of Sartrean definition of freedom frequently laughed at in *Existential Comics*, it also helps to define Sartre’s view of our goals, and especially what freedom means to those goals. Yet, despite of all that I have discussed on what Sartre offers to IR, there is a sense that, in his discussion of individuals he comes close to giving us a glimpse of what in IR we know as the world of diplomacy. With their many different goals and attitudes to life, and in the limited ways that they have to express those goals and worldviews to others, Sartre’s characters inhabit a diplomatic world not dissimilar to the one outlined in classic IR texts, such as Robert Jervis’ *Perception and Misperception in International Relations* (1976).<sup>35</sup>

This comes out most strongly in the first book of the trilogy, *The Age of Reason*, where Mathieu’s search for the money to pay for Marcelle’s abortion leads him into conversations where the reader takes a God’s eye view of knowing the motivations and tempers of each of the interlocutors, but the characters do not. We watch them talk past each other, communicate, learn, and still at the end they do not really know fully where each of them stands. Daniel’s mischievous game playing, Mathieu’s brother Jacques’ use of the personal crisis to get Mathieu to settle down (perhaps the most transparent of the characters), Sarah’s framing of the issue in relation to her own experience of abortion, or Marcelle’s desires that are never fully expressed in words. The single exception might be the communist Brunet, who tries to solve Mathieu’s problems by getting him to join the Communist Party. James Der Derian, in his classic *On Diplomacy*, once defined diplomacy as the mediation of estrangement.<sup>36</sup> In *The Age of Reason* this is what the characters are all doing, and in *The Reprieve* this diplomatic mediation of estrangement is further explored in the interlocking narratives around the Munich agreement. Sartre’s conception of diplomacy moves effortlessly from the world of personal interactions to that of the diplomacy between states. In doing this he also mirrors the aphorism-driven greats of classical studies of diplomacy, such as Wiquefort, Callieres, and Satow, studied by Der Derian.

Equally, the concept of anti-diplomacy explored by Der Derian (associated with the French revolution and Trotsky’s short stint as Soviet foreign minister) begins to look like the certainties of Brunet in *Roads to Freedom*. Brunet does not negotiate, but rather states what he sees as an immutable truth. This mirror’s Trotsky’s famous quip on becoming the Soviet foreign secretary: ‘I

<sup>33</sup>Sartre, *Iron in the Soul*, p. 225.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 225.

<sup>35</sup>Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976).

<sup>36</sup>James Der Derian, *On Diplomacy* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1987), ch. 2.

shall publish a few revolutionary proclamations, and then close shop.<sup>37</sup> In this sense, when we talk about existential IR, there may be a sense that we already have it in the form of the centuries long study of diplomacy. Diplomatic negotiations are practiced by the bulk of the characters, as they both attempt to push their own interests or views of the world and try to understand others. The negotiations go from the mundane concerns of individuals in *The Age of Reason*, to the world of actual diplomats in *The Reprieve*. This constant diplomacy contrasts with Brunet's scorn for it in his own version of anti-diplomacy, where his attempts to solve Mathieu's problem has all the hallmarks of Trotsky's revolutionary proclamations. Brunet's solution is a take it or leave it choice to accept the firm reality of the Communist Party, and it provides a counterpoint to the deliberations of the other characters.

### Conclusion: If the trilogy was so influential, why didn't I ever reference Sartre?

*Roads to Freedom* offers us two fresh ways of looking at IR. The first is the fine-grained analysis of the reach of global politics in the lives of individuals. While a theme throughout the trilogy, this comes to the fore in *The Reprieve*. The second, found especially in the last two books, is a new way of looking at the anatomy of a global crisis. Here the stress moves us away from causes and single rational paths of explanation, towards multiple paths and the scattering of effects as the crisis casts its long shadow. This analysis of crisis also underscores the role of luck. Added to this, his treatment of diplomacy, whether personal or political, suggests that we have always had an existential IR in the form of the study of diplomacy.

For me, though, *Roads to Freedom* will always be associated with my own awakening to the nature of the world, and especially the backdrop of the global politics that threatened us with both nuclear annihilation and (for me in my split British-Dutch worlds) with possible Soviet occupation that was not dissimilar from the events of 1940 in France. Sartre taught me something about the nature of the world events around me, and while I have (at least until this article) hardly used Sartre in my analysis of IR, this does not diminish the effect that *Roads to Freedom* has had on me as I developed the world-views that I would take to my International Relations degree in the autumn of 1982. My interaction with the trilogy highlights Sartre's view on the use of literature, discussed in the introduction. For Sartre, fictional prose gives the reader the chance to exercise their freedom by completing the meaning that the author has laid out as a guide to truth. Sartre's trilogy played that role in my coming to terms with the global politics of the early eighties, and it was my interpretation that led me to study IR.

Yet, all this leaves me with a final question. If Sartre's *Roads to Freedom* was an important influence on my decision to study IR, why did I never use him during my career? A broader version of this question might ask: why is there no explicit existential IR theory? Instead, as I have laid it out here in terms of the influence of Sartre's trilogy, it seems to act out at the corners of our eyes: through diplomacy, as a criticism of causes, as a stress on effects, through making space for luck, and as a corrective to the dominance of abstract or structural attempts at meaning. It chips away at our hybris, but from the shadows, rather than being boldly declared as some kind of field-defining paradigm.

It is here that I finally feel able to resolve the question of the role of existentialism in my IR, and find a resolution to the first of my themes in this article: the juxtaposition of the trilogy with my own coming of age as an IR scholar. What *Roads to Freedom* gave me was a background in challenging the bad faith of simple and logical explanations. A sense that, when confronted by an obvious and parsimonious explanation that claimed to settle a matter, I should dig a little deeper. My research career, from PhD onwards, has been dominated by the gut feeling that the stories IR told about its origins were wrong. Later I would try to tell new stories that were non-linear, and could be summed up by the answer 'it's complicated'. This would take me to explorations of pre-1945 feminist IR, and (most recently) the role of race in international thought.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>37</sup>Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 183.

<sup>38</sup>See, for example, Lucian M. Ashworth, 'Feminism, war and the prospects for international government: Helena Swanwick (1864–1939) and the lost feminists of interwar international relations', *International Feminist Journal of*

Finally, this also explained the apparent contradiction I had faced when first writing this article: if the existentialism of *Roads to Freedom* was so important to my decision to study IR (and influenced my evolving approach), why did I never reference it? The answer seems to be that the debt I owe it is how it influenced the way I saw the world as something that was not reduceable to an abstract and logical structure. It was also not reduceable to a citation for two reasons: first that it was an ethos that emerged from a work of fiction, and second that it was an influence that it has taken me decades to see for what it is. Thanks to a 1980s reading of Sartre – borne certainly from my need for books to read on long transnational train and ferry journeys, and perhaps also from a need for teenage rebellion – I was thrown upon an intellectual path that has led me to where I am today.

I also suspect I am not alone here. In the last section I noted how *Roads to Freedom* explored interactions that are familiar to IR through the study of diplomacy. This is most obvious in the treatment of diplomacy as the mediation of estrangement in the work of James Der Derian. This is no coincidence (ironically, considering the theme of luck explored above). Der Derian includes Sartre as one of many who contributed to the theory of alienation, and while Der Derian does not use *Roads to Freedom*, he does cite a non-fiction work of Sartre's.<sup>39</sup> Sartre, through his intellectual engagement with Fanon, also appears in Robbie Shilliam's dissection of European colonial amnesia. Here, the interaction of Fanon and Sartre, that produced Sartre's preface to Fanon's groundbreaking *Wretched of the Earth*, is discussed in terms of a global historical sociology that brings colonialism and empire into focus.<sup>40</sup> 'He speaks of you often', Sartre says of Fanon in relation to white Europeans and their colonialism, 'never to you.'<sup>41</sup> In both of these cases, Sartre's views on alienation, subjective experience, and plurality are absorbed into arguments of IR theorising. Sometimes an existential IR might be there, we just have to look at the index and the citations.

Yet, in other places there may be existential and Sartrean themes in IR that go unacknowledged. In his *Existential America* George Cotkin argues that existentialism was more influential in the United States than the French pioneers of existentialism realised. Not only were the ideas of Parisian intellectuals absorbed into the fabric of American thought, but earlier writers in the United States had prepared the ground.<sup>42</sup> In Cotkin's view, existentialism runs through American intellectual and cultural traditions, often without acknowledgment. Could the same be true of IR, especially in its embrace of pluralism and multiple subjectivities over the last forty years? This may be especially true for approaches to both the IR of the everyday and narrative IR, mentioned in the introduction as covering similar ground to Sartre. If so, then how many others in IR were, like me, thrown onto the intellectual path they are on now by encounters with an existential *Zeitgeist*?

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*Politics*, 13:1 (2011), pp. 25–43; and 'Warriors, pacifists and empires: Race and racism in international thought before 1914', *International Affairs*, 98:1 (2022), pp. 281–381.

<sup>39</sup>Der Derian, *On Diplomacy*, pp. 5, 26–7.

<sup>40</sup>Robbie Shilliam, 'The crisis of Europe and colonial amnesia: Freedom struggles in the Atlantic biotope', in Julian Go and George Lawson (eds), *Global Historical Sociology* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 124–41.

<sup>41</sup>Jean-Paul Sartre, 'Preface', in Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (Harmondsworth, UK: Pelican, 1983), p. 9.

<sup>42</sup>George Cotkin, *Existential America* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005).