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## BERNARD MITJAVILE

# French thinker Bernard Levy explores totalitarianism's roots

**W**ith every book he has published over the past seven years, French philosopher Bernard Henri Levy has shown a gift to provoke the admiration or ire of intellectual circles.

His name became familiar to Frenchmen after the controversy surrounding his first book, *Barbarism with a Human Face*. In this work, the rising star of the so-called New Philosophers movement denounced with vigor, but sometimes in an obscure philosophical style, Marxism-Leninism as the source of all the evils of communism.

He rejected the Marxist view that history has a meaning and a purpose as a dangerous concept used to justify immoral acts by arguing that they fit in with "history's direction."

He proposed instead a somewhat pessimistic philosophy: History has no meaning, no ultimate purpose and we should not deceive ourselves into believing that tomorrow will be better than today. But even without hope we should act according to ethical principles and resist the forces of barbarism (today communism and fascism).

### Right time

Levy's book came at the right time after the revelation of the Gulag, when French intelligentsia, long imbued with Marxism, began to suspect that there was something fundamentally wrong with communist ideology. He was harshly criticized by some communist intellectuals but this only added to the publicity surrounding him.

Two years later, the young author whose romantic face could be seen almost everywhere — in television literary debates, in public talks with journalists or in bookshop windows — struck again with a new book, *God's Testament*. In it, Levy argued that Jewish traditions and values as he understood them were the only rampart against the barbarism of totalitarian systems.

This time, communist intellectuals remained silent but some religious-minded Jews and Christians complained that he misquoted the Bible. They said Levy's views ran counter to the central Judeo-Christian attitude toward life and history, a hopeful way to look at the future. Levy's book claimed that the hope in a better future for mankind,

in an ideal world of peace, should not be taken seriously and that the Messiah will never come.

### Absolute values

Religious people felt Levy's philosophy was ambiguous because, on one hand, he based his system on the existence of absolute moral values and on the transcendence of God's law and, on the other hand, he said he did not believe in God.

If *God's Testament* irritated some religious circles, Levy's third book, *French Ideology*, infuriated or was admired by many more people.

This time, the fashionable New Philosopher argued that over the last 100 years, most French writers and politicians have shared the same patriotic ideology that was nourished at its core by anti-Semitic ideas.

Raymond Aron, who was then the most respected Jewish intellectual in France (he died in 1983) charged that Levy was falsifying recent French

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history, or at least interpreting it in a simplistic way. According to Aron, Levy's book did little or was even counterproductive in fighting anti-Semitism.

With his last work, a novel published last fall, *The Devil in the Head*, Levy tried to moderate the polemical aspect of his previous essays. Unlike his earlier works, the book did not create an intense controversy and was widely sold.

With this book, Levy had the ambitious design to trace the history of the "barbarian," destructive forces haunting our century and their links. The book begins with "At the end of this voyage, there was the century."

The father of the hero, Benjamin, collaborated with the Nazis during the occupation of France and was sentenced to death after World War II.

Benjamin never knew his father and was raised by his mother and stepfather, a hero of the French resistance against the Germans, who played a key role in the sentencing of his father.

(see MITJAVILE, page 2B)