Jean-Paul Sartre
(1905-1980)
virtually held
court over French
intellectual life for
twenty years. He
influenced writers,
artists, social
scientists, and
political activists
around the world.

He was one of the most famous philosophers of his
century, as well as an influential novelist, playwright and
political activist; yet he was never satisfied with his own
intellectual views.

He put the name
"existentialism"
on the philosophical map,
only to abandon existentialism for
Marxism.

THEN, FINALLY, HE ABANDONED
MARXISM TOO.

A thorn in the side of the
French government, he
was so popular that, at
his death, 50,000 people
followed his funeral
cortege through the
streets of Paris.

(NOT TO MENTION THE
THOUSANDS OF UNIVERSITY
STUDENTS AND DROP-OUTS IN
SCORES OF COUNTRIES WHO
SAT AROUND IN COFFEE
HOUSES, DRESSED IN BLACK,
THINKING MELANCHOLY

WHO WAS THIS
MAN?
Jean-Paul Sartre was born in Paris on June 21, 1905. His mother's family was from Alsace-Lorraine, the section of eastern France whose natives speak both French and German, and over whose borders France and Germany had been quarreling for years.

Jean-Paul's mother was a first cousin of Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965), the German theologian, missionary, and musicologist.

Immediately afterward he decided that God did not exist—though his grandfather and his stepfather definitely did exist. (Sartre spent the next 63 years rebelling against them.)

Jean-Paul's father died when Sartre was only a year old. His mother sought solace in her little ones and concentrated all her attention on him. She loved back to her parent's home, where Jean-Paul's grandfather became a stern influence on him. When he was twelve years old his mother married. The spoiled "Poulou," as he had nicknamed him, experienced her marriage as a loss and a betrayal.

Unfortunately he was not a very good-looking kid. He was pimply, had a strabismus (a wandering eye) due to an illness when he was four years old,

and he was short—5 feet 3 inches tall. (Nevertheless, that made him a half-inch taller than his father had been.)
At seventeen, Jean-Paul received his “baccalaureate” (an elite high school diploma) and began a six-year study at the Sorbonne for his “agrégation,” the exam that would be a ticket to an academic career in philosophy.

**SURPRISINGLY, IN 1928 HE FAILED HIS “AGRÉGATION,” COMING IN LAST IN HIS CLASS.**

They fell in love and developed a companionship that would last until he died—even though they never married, preferred not to live together, had other lovers, and addressed each other with the formal “vous” throughout their lives. They philosophized together and deeply influenced each other’s work. Scholars are still sorting out who was the more original thinker. Today their ashes are buried next to each other in the Montparnasse Cemetery in Paris.

Jean-Paul and Simone studied together for the “agrégation.” In the evenings they would go together to see cowboy films. Sartre got first place in the exam; de Beauvoir got second place. Luckily, this delay in his academic career resulted in his meeting a young philosophy student named Simone de Beauvoir, who was smart, beautiful, nice to Sartre, and (importantly) not taller than he.
In 1929, Sartre began eighteen months of obligatory military service. When he was discharged, he was offered a teaching job at a lycée (a type of state-run prep school for students selected to continue on to university) in Le Havre on the northwest coast of France. De Beauvoir took a teaching job at a lycée in Marseilles on the southern coast. They managed to meet each other whenever they could.

One of these meetings in his, Jean-Paul, and Simone's drinking beer at a café with their friend, Raymond Aron, who had been studying the philosophy of "phenomenology." In many, when Aron turned Sartre, saying, "You see, little friend, if you're a phenomenologist, you can talk about this drink and it's philosophy."

Oh, oh! Now you've done it.

Sartre got very excited about the idea of being able to philosophize about his glass of beer, so in September of 1933 he went to Berlin to study the philosophy of Edmund Husserl, the founder of "phenomenology." (We'll talk about this philosophy shortly.) He returned to his teaching job the next year and began incorporating his newly-discovered phenomenological insights into his own writings. (In fact, in his novel Nausea, published in 1938, there is a phenomenological analysis of a glass of beer.)

But beer was not the only source of Jean-Paul's "highs." In February of 1935, he had his first experience with the drug mescaline.

It must have been a "bad trip," because for the next year and a half I believed I was being chased by a lobster.

These years just before the outbreak of World War II were productive ones for Sartre. In addition to his successful novel, Nausea, he also wrote two philosophy books: The Psychology of the Imagination (1936) and Transcendence of the Ego (1937).

But the peace ended on September 3, 1939, when France and Britain declared war on Germany. Sartre was reinducted into the army.
His division was sent to Eastern France, where he worked in the meteorological service sending up balloons, testing the direction of the wind. However, the war interfered little with his own productivity: he began a big novel, The Age of Reason (published in 1945), and read the nineteenth-century Danish philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard.

In the prisoner of war camp, he washed rarely, didn't shave, and developed a reputation for being dirty. In these conditions he began writing a major philosophical work, Being and Nothingness (published in 1943).

In March 1941, he escaped from the Stalag, sneaked back to Paris, and returned to a teaching job that he had started just before the war. With some other intellectuals he formed a resistance group called “Socialism and Liberty,” but dissolved it after a few months, having accomplished very little.

Sartre then contributed articles to underground newspapers, putting himself in some danger, and he wrote a play called Flies, which contained a blatant anti-Nazi message. The play opened in June 1943 and ran for forty performances. Even though unformed Nazis attended the play, it was suppressed.
When Sartre was not writing, he was spending time in Parisian cafés with de Beauvoir and other writers and artists such as Albert Camus and Pablo Picasso.

The ideas in his plays, novels, and philosophy books had struck a cord in Parisian intellectual life. Suddenly existentialism was in vogue and Sartre was famous. He was invited around the world to lecture. His ideas were also spread through his editorship of a new prestigious journal, Les Temps Modernes (Modern Times), named after Charlie Chaplin's movie.

Ironically, his political movement toward Marxism meant he was being pulled away from existentialism at the very moment that he was famous because of it.

He abandoned his promised sequel to Being and Nothingness because he had "converted" (his word) to Marxism, yet he refused to join the French Communist Party.

Nevertheless, in the "Cold War" he aligned himself against the United States and with the Soviet Union which he visited frequently.

Sartre's defense of the U.S.S.R. caused a split between him and his fellow existentialist, Albert Camus.

Yet Sartre, too, was shocked by the brutality with which the Soviets repressed the uprising in Hungary in 1956.
By the late 1950s, a new intellectual style called Structuralism was stealing the thunder from existentialism, but Sartre was deeply involved in his political projects to defend himself against structuralism and, in any case, he had already moved away from existentialism by then. In 1959, he published Volume Two of his Marxian work, The Critique of Dialectical Reason. As we will see, even though he condemned earlier ideas, he was still influenced by them enough to try to rescue the individual and moralism from the kind of monolithic Marxism represented by the Communist Party. He promised Volume Three of the Critique in a year, and worked on a massive manuscript that he finally abandoned. (It was published in French in 1985, five years after his death.)

In 1964, Sartre was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, which he rejected on political grounds. During the sixties he vigorously supported the Cuban Revolution (he finally broke with Fidel Castro in 1971), and he joined the 92-year-old Bertrand Russell’s tribunal to investigate American war crimes in Vietnam.

When in 1968 the streets of Paris were filled with students in rebellion, Sartre supported the students and, in fact, was blamed by the right-wing press for causing the revolt. He condemned the Conservative government of President de Gaulle for oppressing the young and attacked the French Communist Party for betraying
The demonstrations in Paris marked a watershed in his life. He never wore a suit or tie again, not even on formal occasions. Despite supporting radical political groups throughout the seventies, by 1977 he was forced to say:

I am no longer a Marxist.

During this decade, the abuse to which he had submitted himself took its toll on his health. (He drank too much whisky, he smoked two packs of cigarettes a day, and he took drugs to “rev” himself up when he ate philosophy.)

His doctor threatened to amputate first his toes, then his feet, then his legs, if Sartre would not give up smoking. Sartre said he would consider it. By the end of his life he was almost blind.

Jean-Paul Sartre died on April 15, 1980. Physicians had to dissuade the distraught Simone de Beauvoir from spending the night lying on top of his body. Even though his intellectual status had been eclipsed by the success of structuralism and post-structuralism, he was still immensely popular personally at the time of his death. The streets of Paris teemed with people honoring him on his final journey to the cemetery.
SARTRE
FOR BEGINNERS

Sartre For Beginners is an accessible yet sophisticated introduction to the life and works of the famous French philosopher, Jean Paul Sartre. Sartre was a member of the French underground during World War II, a novelist, playwright, and a major influence in French political and intellectual life.

The book opens with a biographical section, introducing the significant events in the life of the man who coined the term "existentialism."

Then it examines Sartre's early philosophical works. Ideas from Sartre's early novels and dramatic works are discussed, but the greatest part of the book is the presentation of the main concepts from Sartre's Being and Nothingness (1943). These ideas include the topics of consciousness, freedom, absurdity, authenticity, "bad faith," authenticity, hellish confrontation with other people.

Finally, the book deals with Sartre's opinion of his earlier existentialism to herald his conversion to a kind of "traditional" Marxism.

Sartre For Beginners summarizes the work of the most renowned philosopher of the 20th century.