Bruno Jasieński

I burn Paris

Palę Paryż/Je Brûle Paris

Presented by: Krzysztof Ostrowski

According to literary legend, Bruno Jasieński's *Palę Paryż* was intended as a response to the novella *I Burn Moscow* by the French writer Paul Morand. Jasieński allegedly viewed Morand's text as a pamphlet against the European capital of the proletariat, making it the source of one of the most iconic depictions of revolution in Polish literature. Jasieński's work was written during his exile in Paris, where the author was actively involved in local communist organizations. Its publication was met with scandal, which reverberated both in the literary circles of interwar Poland and in the French public sphere. The incident resulted in the expulsion of the Polish former futurist from France, from where he ended up in the USSR. There, he served as the proletariat's court writer. Ultimately, the author fell victim to Stalinist terror, being executed by firing squad following a show trial.

The novel is divided into three parts. The first part concerns the fate of a worker named Pierre, who was laid off from the factory as a result of the economic crisis. The loss of his steady job leads to eviction and homelessness. The protagonist is also abandoned by his lover, Jeanette, to whom he had promised to give a pair of slippers for the ball. During his wanderings on the streets, the protagonist obsessively tries to find her. Driven mad by hunger, Pierre mistakes the prostitutes and street women he passes – who accompany the wealthiest bourgeois in the nightlife of Paris – for his former partner. In a fit of madness, the protagonist attacks one of the men, resulting in his arrest. After his release from prison, he finds employment as a security guard at a research institute for infectious diseases. There, he comes into possession of a vial containing plague bacteria, which – in an act of revenge against the bourgeois society of the French capital – he releases into the drinking water reservoir, thereby triggering an epidemic of the deadly disease.

In the second part, a representative of a revolutionary group from China – P'an Tsiang-Kuei – arrives in the destabilized city. His mission is to exploit the emergency situation to carry out a workers' revolution in the European capital. At this point, an extensive flashback is introduced, depicting the activist's childhood. P'an's father drove a rickshaw for wealthy white people through the streets of Nanjing, which ultimately led to his untimely death. The boy eventually ends up in the care of the Lazarist fathers. Under the guise of missionary charity, the monks reinforce colonial relations and social norms through education and upbringing. In the middle school library, the young man discovers the works of Marx, which allow him to gradually reject Christian teachings and become one of the champions of the revolution.

The final part of the novel depicts Paris, engulfed by both the plague and the communist revolution. The metropolis is divided into sectors controlled by various political factions. Key figures such as the American financier David Lindslay and Rabbi Eleazar Ben-Cwi, head of the Jewish community, make their appearances. The spiritual leader initially interprets the health crisis as a response to

Christian blasphemy. However, when members of the community he leads are swept away by the epidemic, he decides to leave the city on the Seine for New York. As the ship “Mauretania” approaches the east coast of the United States, the capitalist attempts to secure a safe return to his homeland by using his influence. The escape fails, however, and the ship is sunk. Meanwhile, the residents of Paris win the battle against the plague. At the same time, the communist faction prevails in the struggle for political “rule over souls.” The former bourgeois capital is reorganized into a proletarian polis. The advent of this utopian vision in the novel’s epilogue legitimizes a new political paradigm in Western Europe.

In his work, Jasieński paints a picture of the city as a space for multigenerational economic, sexual, and symbolic exploitation of the working classes by the propertied classes. He also directly criticizes the colonial order and religious fanaticism. Thus, the work, published in 1929, illustrates the beginnings of the Socialist Realist propaganda and agitprop novel. Subsequent editions of Palę Paryż, produced under Soviet supervision, were purged of avant-garde elements and adapted to ideological content guidelines. The author’s use of an infectious disease as a political metaphor enables him to level unprecedented criticism of the capitalist order. By undermining the existing social and political system, the epidemic enables its radical challenge.

Jasieński’s novel was written simultaneously in two languages: French and Polish. The first French edition appeared in serial form in the magazine “L’Humanité” (*Je Brûle Paris*, 1928). The book was published in both Polish and French a year later (*Je Brûle Paris*, 1929 / *Palę Paryż*, 1929). The work also appeared in a Russian self-translation (*Ja żgu Pariż*, 1929). There are also translations into English (*I Burn Paris*, 2012), Croatian (*Palim Pariz*, 2016), German (*Pest über Paris*, 2020), Spanish (*Yo quemo París*, 2023), Greek (*Tha kapso to Parisi*, 2025) and Turkish (*Paris Yanıyor*, 2026).

LANGUAGE: Polish/Polski, French / Français

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