

Giovanni Catelli

Camus Must Die

*In memory of Imre Nagy
and Salvador Allende*

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Wrongs that are not righted within a generation simply vanish – it's as if nothing ever happened. Everything disappears – the killers and the killed.

Jan Zábřana

It is essential to die unreconciled and not of one's own free will.

Albert Camus

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Foreword

Albert Camus was a free, indomitable and dangerous man.

He was a threat to all the powers that be, promptly denouncing any abuse, brutality or injustice they committed.

He was a threat to the dirty consciences among the French and the Algerian rebels, the old collaborationists and Stalinists, the middle-class moralists and the high-brow society because his critical spirit, his inflexible honesty, as well as his unconditional love for humankind and for life enabled him to see beyond the surface of things.

His death – and thus his silence for good – benefitted many: the French Nationalists, who were against an independent Algeria; the Algerian extremists, who took umbrage at his moderate stance on the fate of the *pieds-noirs*, the Algerian French, in the event of Algerian independence; the reactionary forces, who saw him as a champion of the Resistance and the left wing; the Stalinists and the Soviet Union, whom he had bitterly criticised following their brutal attack on Hungary; the fascist dictatorship in Spain, which he opposed in his public speeches, seizing every chance to denounce it so that the Western countries would deny it entry into the international institutions.

It has always been hard to believe that he died because of a common car accident. Fate doesn't conspire against a man just like that – that's something men do. And now a crystal-clear clue has emerged from the indistinct flow of time suggesting a name, an order, a will to kill. Yes, perhaps someone really did decide Albert Camus had to die. Having found that clue, it is our duty to dig deeper so that past events may not be forgotten. Instead, let us ensure that the light of the present, the light of historical investigation shines at last on the naked truth of certain events and, ultimately, let us make it known and understood to the future generations.

During our investigation we shall meet real, living protagonists – all characters of great literary and human depth whose paths crossed with Camus' often in unpredictable but always fruitful and sometimes decisive manners.

These protagonists lived in Prague and Moscow. Their names are Jan Zábřana, Marie Zábřanová and Boris Pasternak. Prague and Moscow – as well as Paris, of course – can tell us the truth about Albert Camus' fate.

A conspiracy

Albert Camus died in January 1960. The man who spent his life fighting to defend others from injustice and absurdity died for no apparent reason. And the seeming cause of his death was what he himself had dubbed the pinnacle of absurdity: a car crash.

He was headed to Paris. His publisher and friend Michel Gallimard was at the wheel. They had just had lunch and were cruising along a wide, straight road in broad daylight. Nothing seemed to bode for the worst.

Then, all of a sudden, tragedy struck. Passing drivers say the speeding car was “waltzing”. The car skidded left and right with such violence that the back-seat passengers (Gallimard’s wife and daughter) thought Gallimard was trying to negotiate an unexpected bend. It was as if “something were crumbling underneath them”. Then the car crashed into one of the trees along the road and ricocheted against another tree a few metres further on. It was completely destroyed. His skull cracked and his neck broken, Camus died on the spot.

Michel Gallimard was found on the ground in a pool of his own blood; he would die in hospital a few days later. His wife was next to him in a state of shock; their daughter had landed in a field some twenty metres further down, dazed but unharmed.

According to biographer Herbert Lottman, “The accident was seemingly due to a locked-up wheel or a broken axle; however, not even the experts could figure out how an accident like that could happen on a straight, 9-metre-wide road with barely any traffic.”

There you have it.

Right from the outset, the events and logic didn’t match up. One had to wonder whether the appearances weren’t concealing the truth – a design, perhaps, hidden behind something so trivial.

Many refused to believe that the accident and Camus’ death were the mere work of fate; it was all too obvious. Something didn’t quite click; it seemed a bit too ironic that fate had lined up so flawlessly with Camus’ almost supernatural omen.

None of the ones who loved him and cherished his dignity and his teachings could find a shred of credibility in the facile evidence; how could fate and foreboding have lined up so perfectly? Years later, other silent followers would also find that trivial accident inadequate, inauthentic, almost a poor and gratuitous *coup de theatre*.

An unspoken certainty haunted them for ages, as would a lingering restlessness, a feeling of deceit and the impression that some sort of hidden machination had taken place.

But then one day, a clue in the form of an unexpected account came out of the blue. It was the undying proof that had stood the test of time – the vital clue that turned appearances on their head and revealed a conspiracy.

Symmetry

Fate is a wonderful thing. In an instant it can make age-old problems, inextricable issues and awkward cases come to a head.

One day, a world-renowned intellectual committed on several fronts and alone in his stand against the strongest powers that be said that the pinnacle of absurdity would be to die in a car crash. And that was just how he died, as if to reveal some absurd machination.

The illusory symmetry of fate had come full circle, clinching fate's master plan and indulging an involuntary prophecy; Camus' omen had been proven spot on.

A massive deception was fed to everyone, no matter how sensible or oblivious they were, or whether they were intellectuals rather than members of the general public, or even haters rather than followers. Symmetry lay in the ambush, in the threat and in the inexplicable outcome – an outcome just as absurd and flawless as it was designed to be. What better fate could befall the extreme consistency, the prophecy come true, the end that confirmed the lucid purpose of a life? What better blend of truth and deception, absurdity and conspiracy, fate and design, prophecy and execution could there be?

Reality and hard facts could not survive such perfection, such a flawless convergence of fate and machination, the absolute accident and the absolute sabotage rolled into one. Fifty years later we are still caught in this mortal embrace of truth and illusion, where the evidence seems to cancel out even the mere thought of an ambush.

And yet, fate hadn't quite buried those events for good; in fact, over the years it spread traces of the truth. The most obvious were left in Prague in 1980, twenty years after the crash. These traces are decisive; they are stone cold in their precision and thoroughness, so detailed and connected to unquestionable facts and dates that nobody could know of in 1980 Czechoslovakia, when the country was in the Soviet stranglehold that had been growing tighter and tighter since Charter 77. Fate handed these traces to a defeated man who had resigned himself to the overwhelming righteousness of history, to personal downfall, to the lucidity of despair. This man preserved them without ever mentioning them to anyone.

He died a few years later.

This man was a poet, a translator and a silent, implacable witness to the misery that history bestowed on his country, his parents and even him. He knew he would have to give in but not without remembering, not without writing a memory of the decay, a chronology of a collapse.

We do not know whether he did it for himself or for those who would, one day, pore over the memories of those years; we do know that he wrote a diary, filling it with events and thoughts in his daily fight against disgust and humiliation.

He resisted for years.

Then he fell ill.

He entrusted his papers to his beloved wife.

He died.

He was the Prague man.



The car wreck after the accident that cost Albert Camus his life.

The dream

On the night of January 2nd 1960, Albert had a long, disturbing nightmare.

The sun was setting; Camus was being pursued along a country road by four faceless men. They seemed to be holding back, as if they didn't really want to catch up with him. Still, they inched closer and closer, more and more menacingly.

Camus ran on, despite his weak lungs. Gasping for air, he turned now and then to make sure he was still at a safe distance. He tried to identify those rubber faces in spite of their smooth, featureless outlines.

He ran for what seemed like forever, with no thoughts other than escaping, desperately gulping down the air and sounding like a drowning man. Suddenly, he saw a car coming from a side road. He stopped at the crossroads and started waving his arms; the car stopped, he jumped in and the car skidded off.

He tried to catch his breath. He tried to make out the driver's face but it was shrouded in complete darkness.

The car went faster and faster, tearing through the deserted, unknown and featureless countryside.

Camus asked the driver a question but got no answer. The silence in the passenger compartment grew heavier and heavier. Suddenly, the headlights lit up a broad bend and the high wall of a country house straight ahead. The car shot forward; the driver didn't even try to swerve.

Just when the crash seemed inevitable, Camus cried out and flung himself on the wheel.

Right then, he fell out of bed and woke up, gasping in anguish.

The journey

Even though he had purchased a train ticket to travel with René Char, on January 3rd Camus boarded the car of his friend and publisher Michel Gallimard and left his house in Lourmarin, in the south of France. He was heading to Paris. With them were Gallimard's wife Anne and daughter Janine, as well as their dog. Since there was no more room in the car, Char would take the train as planned.

The day before, Camus had taken his wife Francine and their children to the station in Avignon, so they could go straight home.

On the morning of the 3rd he called his secretary in Paris to tell her which assignments to decline and to confirm he was on his way back.

Maybe the call was intercepted; in any case, several sources could have reported precisely on Camus' next movements.

On December 30th he had written to actress Catherine Sellers, one of his lovers, to tell her he would soon be back. He wrote to her again on the 31st, opening with "This is my last letter..." and saying exactly when he would be back: "See you on Tuesday, my love. I'm dying to kiss you..."

On the 30th he had also written to the most important woman in his life, his long-time partner actress María Casares, detailing his plans. "This is my last letter... just to let you know I'll be back on Tuesday. I'm coming back by car with the Gallimards on Monday. (They're dropping by on Friday. I'll call you when I get home but we can already plan dinner together on Tuesday)."

Several people could have been privy to Camus' plans and movements with sufficient notice. The two actresses' entourages were rife with potential rats: Casares was acquainted with several politically engaged individuals and the news she received was more accurate; perhaps she unwittingly provided the killers with crucial information.

On December 29th Camus had also written to Mi, a new partner of his in Denmark, telling her he would soon be heading back to Paris.

Many people had access to Camus' plans and would know about his intention to travel by car with the Gallimards.

There was plenty of time to set up an operation.

It was a huge opportunity.

The departure

So on the morning of January 3rd Camus, as was his custom, gave the house keys to Mme Ginoux, telling her he'd be back in eight days at the most. He boarded Gallimard's powerful Facel Vega and they set off.

A few days earlier, publisher Robert Laffont had suggested that Michel Gallimard should take a train to the south of France; Gallimard, however, insisted he wanted to visit Camus and travel with him on the way back.

Fate's machinations are often as random and fleeting as foam, suddenly coalescing as if by magic; other times they leave their mark with secret fierceness, converging from afar with a meticulously planned design.

On that day, the car and those men had their paths marked out for them.

And other men would follow the same path.

After bidding farewell to their friends Mathieu and Jacques Polge, the group set off along National 7 to Orange, where they stopped for lunch.

A fast driver by nature, that day Michel Gallimard decided to take it easy and chat with his family and friend as they cruised along.

That may be what saved the passengers' lives – at least for the time being.

But someone was travelling with them, silently and in the shadows.

There was still plenty of road to go and with it came plenty of chances to act.

In the afternoon the four set off again, heading for the hotel restaurant Le Chapon Fin, in the village of Thoisey just outside Mâcon. They had booked a few rooms there so they could split the journey and not get caught up in the inbound traffic caused by the holidaymakers on their way home. They weren't in a hurry. And fate had its plans laid out.

The overnight stay would provide some relief from the long journey; the next day they would head to Paris, rested and in no hurry.

It would be a long night at the village. Not everyone would sleep.

The travellers were merry and didn't know any better.

A lavish dinner and a friendly atmosphere awaited them. Everything seemed to bode well.

The world's secret laws and their razor-sharp weapons seemed light-years away.

The crushing grip of the powers that be on individual fates seemed still invisible, remote and even unreal.

So let us leave these men and women to their final hours of happiness.

The Prague man

The Prague man was a poet. History had already taken its toll on him through his loved ones. His socialist parents had been persecuted and imprisoned by the regime after 1948. He had witnessed them wither and die under the weight of imprisonment, deprivation and illness. A whole generation's hope for a fairer society had soon been crushed by bureaucracy, by obtuse oppression and by the secret police.

Literature was his safe haven from life's never-ending adversities, daily hardships and the progressive dissolution of hope and delusion. The art of translation and poetry opened up remote havens that history, life or daily desolation couldn't touch.

Slowly but surely he built up a solid reputation, becoming a trustworthy moral authority as he silently bore the unbearable brunt of events, of the pain that history, empires and invaders constantly inflicted on his land. The 20th century had brought independence to that wonderfully civilised and cultured country of his but soon also brought Nazi occupation and, after the liberation, a new foreign tyranny.

Pravda vítězí – truth prevails, claimed Jan Hus, who had been betrayed and burnt alive years earlier. But a man's life is short and fragile; his strength is limited and the life of states and empires, no matter how inert, cynical and oppressive they are, is so much longer and resistant that it is a hopeless battle for an unarmed individual.

The 1968 Prague Spring seemed a dream come true, the utopia of a humane socialism, the third way so feared by the two empires that would soon be itching to crush it, aware as they were of the danger it posed and of the strength generated by civilisation and freedom of spirit. It had been a short-lived dream but those few months had been enough to make up for years of anguish, repression, obtuse short-sightedness, back-stabbing informers and stifling control. A dream of his was about to come true that summer: he would translate *Doctor Zhivago*, a work he had long pursued and conquered through hardships worthy of a novel. His translation was almost ready but then, on a fateful August night, the invasion came – a low blow coming from the Warsaw Pact. The black horde, the tanks, the occupiers soon set out to forbid new publications and crush that new sense of uncensored freedom that Dubček had hopelessly tried to get the distant masters – the owners of that half of the world – to accept.

During that short-lived season everything seemed possible; censorship had disappeared and new books and translations were put in the works without the fear of vetoes; people were free to talk and voice their ideas, opinions and hopes.

Being able to write and translate without any forced political or ideological bias seemed almost unreal to the people who had experienced the dark years of Gottwald, of the Slánský trial and of the sombre and overbearing powers that be.

Intellectuals were overwhelmed by their almost unreal freedom, so it was all the more painful to go back to order and cowardly obedience to the party's dictates, to the cultural and literary tastes of its lieutenants and of the men in charge of the cultural policy.

From then on, everything would be tougher, especially for the ones who had found their own niche where to write, translate and breathe, for the ones who sowed their talent, limpid gaze and taste as poets and translators in the interstices left untouched by the powers that be. There's an emblematic sentence in his diary that says a lot about the feeling of utter defeat

and vainness of every creation he and perhaps others experienced in the new situation:
“discreetly burying one’s talent like shit in a sandy beach, in the dead of night.”

He was the Prague man.

His name was Jan Zábřana.

Jan Zábřana

Fate led me to Jan Zábřana in a bookshop on the Opletalova, in Prague, on a bright cold afternoon. The sun was settling. I stopped to gaze at the house opposite, its windows looking out on emptiness and the sky – the building had collapsed except for the façade, balanced precariously as it waited for a prop from the future. The past had disappeared behind it like so much sand and all that remained was the faint architecture of memory, the simulacrum of things gone by, the elegant shape of an illusion that only daylight could dissolve. At night the windows went dark again, nothingness coalesced beyond the façade and nobody would guess there was no actual house with walls and rooms protected from the shadows. I went into the bookshop – the cavern of warmth, light and words I visited occasionally on my days of wandering – and roamed the bookshelves with no particular book in mind. Then I noticed a thick white book on a shelf, its shine magnified by its plastic wrap.

I read the title: *Celý život*.

Jan Zábřana. *A whole life*.

I already knew Zábřana and his poems. This, however, was a book I'd never even picked up. It was a mint edition; the salesman told me it had been published in two parts and had quickly sold out. The book was about sombre and painful years for the writer and for many others; and in those daily memories there were traces of a past life, of the years the reader might have experienced too and that had never quite vanished.

Late that night, as I sat on my sofa with the Vltava roaring outside, I read Zábřana's thoughts, entrusted as a vital part of him to thin sheets of paper in order to stem defeat, the derision of things, the advancing of death on his generation leaving no chance of escape or survival. I leafed through the book, picking out pages at random and drawing closer to his later years, thus closer to the present. I got to the summer of 1980. As I read a passage I suddenly realised I was holding my breath – he was detailing a fatal accident from twenty years before. It was Albert Camus'.

The truth

The words were accurate, cutting and straight to the point.

They seemed to have been laid out on the page with mysterious, fatal sparseness.

They told of a far-off time, a great many complex events, a deadly conspiracy, the deceptiveness of things, and of how men are prone to short-sightedness.

It was all distilled into those words. An irreparable event, the death of a man that recalled the death of ancient heroes, stricken by ill luck or by jealous gods just when they were about to clinch their greatest feats – this was the fate told and sealed in those few short, impeccable lines.

It was like a sudden, entrancing act of fate that left no room for astonishment, breath for words or memories to regret.

Everything was clear now.

The laws of the world had closed in over a man and his life.

The laws of deception and oblivion had mingled to conceal the names of the killers and the crucial events surrounding the sacrifice from history and from the fragile memory of man.

The eternity of oblivion and the darkness of time had immediately enshrouded reality, things, events and the silent occurrence of it all.

And yet, like sparks from a far-off fire with no-one to see it, the untainted words of a man managed to save what eternal darkness had been plotting to enshroud forever.

It was almost like some mysterious justice from far away had sent a fragile, unknown witness to an unwelcoming world to make a righteous man privy to the ultimate flash of a dying truth, the pale glimmer of an unseen shipwreck, so as to preserve its traces forever.

Thus wrote Jan Zábřana in his diary in the late summer of 1980:

“I heard something very strange from a knowledgeable and well-connected man. He says the car crash that cost Camus his life in 1960 was set up by the Soviet intelligence.

They rigged the tyre with a tool that eventually pierced it when the car was travelling at high speed.

The order was issued by the minister of internal affairs Šepilov himself as payback for the article published in *Franc-Tireur* in March 1957 in which Camus commented on the events in Hungary, explicitly attacking the minister.

It seems it took the intelligence three years to carry out the order.

They managed eventually and in such a way that, until today, everyone thought Camus had died because of an ordinary car crash.

The man refused to tell me his source but he claimed it was completely reliable and that he knew beyond a shadow of doubt that that was how things had played out and that they had Camus' death on their consciences.”

That was all.

Honour and fate

Death begins in a mysterious instant that might appear decisive only much later; at the present time, we are all blind and directionless; we move around sometimes thinking we know things, imagining the future, even if we're surrounded by darkness. Albert Camus had an instinct for events and he could instantly make out what it was right to fight for. Maybe at the end of 1956, in the light of those grave events, he had followed his instinct and his sense of justice without thinking about the consequences. In a way, a man of principles never dies – his beliefs outlive him. Camus was already ahead of his time and his life, like at the time of the Resistance, when mere survival was secondary to him and, under certain conditions, unbearable. So he had nothing to lose and every word and move of his would give further meaning to his life – this was what mattered to him.

In late October 1956 the Soviets had crushed the Budapest uprising in blood. All of Europe had witnessed powerlessly as the USSR abused its power, managing only to provide the rebels with ideological support. Camus couldn't help speaking his mind: he let loose with all the indignation of a libertarian who refused to bow to tyranny, regardless of its colour; he was also directly called on by the Hungarian writers as they sent out a desperate cry for help to the free thinkers of the West. He went out of his way, generously leveraging his name and his moral authority. His words full of indignation were published in all the major international papers; in Paris, the stage of his battles and the land of his unbreakable freedom, he gave memorable speeches.

He didn't just shoot down the invaders of Hungary – he also directed scathing words at the Soviet foreign minister Dmitrij Šepilov, who had arrogantly championed his government's actions even before the UN (where he officially represented the Soviet Union).

Twenty-four years later, Zábrana's source recalled the past events down to the finest detail. The memory of those facts had been preserved in rooms far away from Moscow; nothing of Camus' efforts had been lost.

If we think about the massive international respect Camus garnered – he was a shoo-in for the Nobel Prize – these statements must have rubbed the Soviet leaders – and Dmitrij Šepilov especially – the wrong way.

Furthermore, at the time the public opinion of intellectuals was far more feared and heeded than today. Camus' position on the events in Hungary had really made a huge impression on Europe and across the world.

He had to be stopped, no matter how.

The words

Albert Camus had sided firmly with the Hungarian uprising since autumn 1956. Prompting his decision was also an appeal by the Hungarian writers to the greatest Western writers of the time.

The appeal was issued on November 4th 1956 and renewed on the 7th, during the tragic days of the Budapest uprising that was crushed by invading Soviet troops. The troops would eventually capture and kill prime minister Imre Nagy, guilty of opposing the normalisation.

Camus answered with an article titled "Réponse à un appel" published in *Franc-Tireur* on November 10th.

On November 23rd he issued a message in favour of Hungary at a meeting of French students.

He was then interviewed on the matter by the *New York Times* on February 24th 1957.

Issue 63 (February 21st-27th 1957) of *Demain* ran his article "Le socialisme des potences" (The socialism of gallows).

Then, in October 1957, the London *Times* ran a message by Camus titled "Appeal for Hungarian Writers" that was sent to a London meeting on the matter.

Finally, the December 1958 issue of *Témoins* ran an article titled "Encore la Hongrie", including his foreword to *La vérité sur l'affaire Nagy* (Plon, 1958).

Two speeches of his on the matter sparked the ire of Soviet minister Šepilov, whom he attacked directly. The first speech took place on October 30th 1956, during a meeting of the exiled Spanish republican government; the speech was then published in *Monde Nouveau*:

"'The world keeps turning' said foreign minister Šepilov of on the brutal attack by the Soviet troops. Indeed it does – and lies eventually crumble as the long-darkened truth begins to enlighten us. Artificial worlds held together by blood and terror crumble amidst the silence and annoyance of the ones who like to praise themselves. The freedom they labelled as vain and unworthy took a mere day to blow away the thousands of high-brow tomes and savage armies used to keep it buried. That freedom is on the march again and millions of people now know it's the only yeast of history, their only reason to live, and the only bread they can never have enough of."

The more famous interview, quoted by Zábrana's source, took place at the Salle Wagram in Paris on March 15th 1957 and was published in *Franc-Tireur* on March 18th 1957 with the title "Kádár a eu son jour de peur." Here, Camus once again attacked Soviet foreign minister Šepilov, who in a display of utter arrogance had upheld the Soviet attack at the United Nations summit.

Here is the part concerning Šepilov:

"When minister Šepilov, having come back from Paris, dares to write that 'Western art is destined to pierce the human soul and form slaughterers of all kinds', it's time to answer that at least our writers and artists have never slaughtered anyone and are generous enough not to blame the theory of socialist realism for the massacres covered up or ordered by Šepilov and by those like him.

The truth is that there's room for everything among us – even for evil and even for Šepilov's writers but even for honour, for the free life of desire, for the adventure of intelligence. In Stalinian culture, on the other hand, there's no room for anything other than lectures, a grey life and the catechism of propaganda. Hungarian writers cried it out to those who still doubted it before manifesting their final choice because today they'd rather be quiet than lie by following an order."

Camus' words had a tremendous impact and furthered his commitment to ensuring that the Hungarian writers' fight for freedom wouldn't fall into oblivion.

He proved to be a thorn in Moscow's side as he tirelessly brought up the Soviets' overbearing before the international public opinion.

It was no longer tolerable.

Something had to be done to stop him.

The entry in Zábřana's diary dates back to 1980. He specifically mentions Camus' speech published in *Franc-Tireur* twenty-four years earlier and the minister Camus accused. It is highly unlikely that he could have such a clear recollection of an episode related to events far from the issues and the harsh reality of post-Charter 77 Czechoslovakia.

It was almost certainly Zábřana's source who provided all the flawlessly detailed circumstances of the event thanks to the information he had.

Hungary

The Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956 left the European public opinion and all the non-Stalinist left aghast.

The Khrushchev Report had unveiled the true nature of Stalin's regime. The brutal and traumatic operation that followed it showed that Moscow's methods hadn't changed after all.

After the uprisings in East Berlin in 1953 and in Poznan in June 1956 caused by the deteriorating material and working conditions of Eastern European labourers, it took a mere spark in Hungary on 23rd October 1956 to set off a raging fire that couldn't be contained.

On the afternoon of the 23rd a student rally organised in support of Gomulka and the Poznań demonstrators arrived in Pest before the statue in honour of the poet Petőfi, who had inspired the foundation of an authorised but strongly nationalist youth organisation.

The gathering soon turned into a violent protest. The crowd headed to the House of Parliament as tens of thousands of people converged to the city centre.

The demonstrators demolished the statue of Stalin and a massive crowd assembled before the offices of the national radio. The Ávh (security police) opened fire on the crowd, causing the first victims.

The central committee of the communist party decided to call in Soviet troops "in case of need." On October 24th Imre Nagy was appointed head of the government, replacing András Hegedüs.

The intervention of the Soviet troops turned the revolt into a full-blown insurrection. Weapons were handed out to civilians; police cars were set on fire and the Ávh offices were besieged by the crowd. Workers' councils were set up in factories and a general strike was called; the workers themselves turned out to be the staunchest defenders of the revolt, despite the Soviets' crushing superiority.

Mikojan and Suslov hurried to Budapest to assist the ambassador Andropov and to take stock of the situation.

The Soviet forces based in Hungary consisted mostly of tanks and were of little use in the repression.

On October 25th the Nagy government installed itself and Kádár was appointed party secretary in lieu of Gerő. Members of the police and army took sides with the rebels.

Imre Nagy parlayed with the Russians, who still saw him as a trustworthy figure and the only one capable of stopping the revolt. On October 28th he managed to negotiate a cease-fire, acknowledging the national and democratic character of the insurrection and announcing the dissolution of the Ávh as well as the imminent retreat of the Soviet troops.

When the troops did indeed begin to withdraw, though, it turned out to be a fluke.

For a few days Hungary believed it had fended off the threat of the superpower, but the international scene offered the Russians an easy pretext to move in again. It began with the Suez Canal crisis, following a joint attack against Egypt by England, France and Israel that shifted the focus of the international public opinion.

On October 31st the presidium of the central committee of the Pcus green-lighted the invasion: new troops would initiate a massive attack. Thanks to the simultaneous assault of the Western powers against Egypt the Soviets were able to conceal any weakness and come even with the West in the face of the public opinion.

The first Soviet armoured troops reached the Hungarian borders on November 1st.

Nagy demanded an explanation from ambassador Andropov, who played down the whole affair. Aware of the threat, however, Nagy declared Hungary's neutrality and withdrew the country from the Warsaw Pact; he called for the UN to add the Hungarian situation to its agenda. He realised time was short and that Hungary was caught in a rapidly-closing vice.

Soon, the excitement and enthusiasm of so many Hungarians would be replaced with terror.

On November 2nd the UN added the Hungarian issue to its agenda.

On November 3rd, during further negotiations in a Soviet military encampment, KGB men arrested general Pál Maléter, the head of the Hungarian delegation.

On November 4th the Red Army, formerly a liberating army, came to invade and crush Hungary's national freedom, deploying a staggering four thousand tanks.

Kádár, who had flown to Moscow, quickly came back and radio-broadcast the formation of a new government.

The workers' councils resisted heroically despite being thoroughly outnumbered.

Unlike the first offensive in October, this time the Soviets also deployed infantry, bombers and artillery – it was a full-blown war strategy.

The industrial and working-class areas of Budapest resisted stoically, faring better than the army itself, which had for all intents and purposes been beheaded.

On November 10th the workers' councils called for a cease-fire, their last shred of hope seemingly gone.

Kádár formed a new government, backdating its existence to November 3rd so he could claim that a legitimately ruling government had called on the Soviet troops to intervene.

Imre Nagy and other members of the government had fled to the Yugoslavian embassy, hoping to be granted political asylum. Little did they know that Khrushchev had flown to the Brionian Islands to convince Tito to hand over the fugitives.

On November 22nd they left the embassy with a safe-conduct from Kádár guaranteeing them a secure "return home."

Instead, they were arrested by the Soviets and immediately deported.

Imre Nagy, General Pál Maléter and collaborator and journalist Miklós Gimes were tried and, on June 16th 1958, they were hanged.

It was only on June 16th 1989, 31 years later, that Imre Nagy and the other men were given proper burial. Nagy's name was also cleared.

The appeal

On November 4th 1956, when the Soviet troops were already besieging Hungary, Radio Budapest sent out a message to intellectuals worldwide: "Poets, writers, men of knowledge from all over the world – Hungary's writers are calling on you. Heed our appeal. We are fighting on the barricades for our country's freedom, for Europe's and for humankind's dignity. We're going to die. Do not let our sacrifice be in vain. At the supreme hour and in the name of a massacred nation we call on you, Camus, Malraux, Mauriac, Russell, Jaspers, Einaudi, Eliot, Koestler, Madariaga, Jiménez, Kazantzakis, Lagerkvist, Laxness, Hesse and many other fighters of the spirit. Take action."

On November 8th Camus was wired the text of the appeal and set to work right away. He called on left liberal Georges Altman, the editor-in-chief of his favourite daily, *Franc-Tireur*. On November 9th the paper published the Hungarians' appeal and on the 10th it ran Camus'.

To Camus, the tragic invasion of Hungary was tantamount to the fascist destruction of the Spanish Republic from 20 years earlier – an event he had spoken of just a few days before, on October 30th, during a public speech in honour of historian and man of State Salvador de Madariaga. On that occasion Camus had also sent out his first, scathing words against Soviet foreign minister Dmitrij Šepilov, the man who would eventually put out a hit on him.

In his answer to the appeal, Camus wrote:

"Yesterday, the press and *Franc-Tireur* published the upsetting appeal launched the other day by Hungarian writers to Western intellectuals. Since my name was mentioned, even though I have never felt as powerless as I have in these sombre days, I feel it is my duty to answer personally.

Our Hungarian brothers are isolated in a fortress of death and are certainly unaware of the immense wave of unanimous indignation that has swept over French writers. They are right in thinking that words are not enough and that it is laughable to simply cry out in vain against Hungary's crucifixion. . The truth is that international society as a whole, having suddenly found the strength to intervene in the Middle East after years of doing nothing, is letting Hungary be slaughtered.

Twenty years ago we let the Spanish Republic be trampled by the troops and weapons of a foreign dictatorship. Our reward for this lack of pluck was World War II.

The weakness of the United Nations and their divisions are slowly leading us to the third world war. It is already on our doorstep. And it will cross the threshold in an instant unless international law is not imposed worldwide to protect peoples and individuals.

This is why I believe that, rather than letting loose our urge to revolt or revelling in the dreadful sadness and shame that have seized us following the desperate appeals of our Hungarian brothers, I believe it is better to invite all the ones called on in the appeal of November 7th to act constructively on the United Nations. This is the text I suggest, as it clearly lays out our demand and our responsibilities:

'The European writers listed below ask that the General Assembly take constant stock of the genocide being suffered by the Hungarian nation. They ask that on this occasion each nation take its responsibilities, which shall be recorded, and vote on the immediate withdrawal

of Soviet troops, their replacement with international control forces available to the United Nations, the liberation of the prisoners and the deported and the successive organisation of a free consultancy of the Hungarian people. These are the only measures that can ensure the fair peace that all peoples wish for, including the Russian people. Should the United Nations not fulfil their duty, the signatories commit themselves not only to boycotting the organisation of the United Nations and its cultural bodies, but also to taking every opportunity to publicly denounce its shortcomings and its refusal to act. The signatories ask the Secretary General to act as their mouthpiece at the United Nations to assure that their appeal is not driven by any will to blackmail – a vain act after all – but by the painful awareness of their own responsibilities and by their anguished rebellion against the martyrdom of a heroic and free people.’

I hope that this text will be signed by all the addressees of the appeal launched by the Hungarian writers. Every European writer may, wherever they may be, gather the signatures of as many intellectuals as they can and wire this text to the secretary of the United Nations.

This is, much to our shame, all we can do to answer the appeal of our massacred brothers so that this slaughter may finally end, and to show the whole world that next to our weak or cruel governments, above the curtain of dictatorships, despite the tragic failure of the left’s traditional movements and ideals, there exists a true Europe united in justice and freedom in the face of all tyrannies.

Today, Hungarian fighters are dying in mass for this Europe.

So that their sacrifice may not be in vain, we with the freedom to speak must show them our commitment and our faith day after day and ensure that the Budapest appeal is heard as far away as possible.”

Message to the students

Camus couldn't bear to stand idle as a European country was violated and drenched in its own blood.

Restless and nervous because of the West's failure to act, on November 23rd he sent a message in defence of Hungary to a meeting of French students protesting against the invasion.

He wrote:

"The only thing I can affirm publicly today, after taking part either directly or indirectly in twenty years of our blood-drenched history, is that the supreme value, the ultimate good worth living and fighting for, is always freedom.

The men of my generation were twenty when Hitler rose to power and the first Moscow trials were organised.

For ten years we had to fight against Hitler's tyranny and the right-wing men behind him. Then we spent another ten years fighting Stalin's tyranny and the sophisms of his left-wing defenders.

Today, despite the endless betrayals and slander intellectuals from all walks of life have buried it under, freedom is still our first reason for living. I admit that, during these years, I have come close to despairing for the fate of freedom.

It has been betrayed by those whose vocation was to defend it; it has been trampled by our clergymen before silent peoples. I have feared it would die. And that is why I have sometimes felt dishonoured at the way our times have covered up everything.

But youths from Hungary, Spain and France – from every country, in fact – are proving that it doesn't have to be so and that nothing will ever crush this pure, unmitigated force that drives men and whole peoples to claim the honour of living on their own feet.

You are becoming a part of our history, so don't ever forget that.

Never forget it, on no account!

And while you should accept to argue loyally, never accept that the freedom of spirit, of the person, of the nation be called into question, were it even temporarily, were it even for a mere second.

You must know now that when the spirit is in chains, work is enslaved; when workers are oppressed, writers are gagged; and when a nation isn't free, all socialism does is enslave everyone.

May the Hungarian sacrifice that has led us to ponder our shame and our powerlessness at least help us to remember all this.

We will be less inclined to make our country bear the whole burden of its historical shortcomings. We will take better care of it and never cease to demand all the justice it can give us, for the sake of its survival and its freedom.

So do not follow our example, for we have worn ourselves out fighting to rectify words and denunciate shams, producing sterile and never-ending civil battles.

Seek what unites you rather than what divides you.

You might thus be spared an unbearable solitude. Perhaps, then, you will rebuild for yourselves this country that I love as much as my own freedom and which, despite its misadventures, its weaknesses and its mistakes, still deserves our faithfulness.

In any case, no matter where or when, be sure to preserve the memory of what we have just experienced, to be true to freedom, to the rights and duties it entails, so that you may never ever have to accept that someone, no matter how great, or that a party, no matter how powerful, may think for you or decide how you should behave.

Forget your teachers – they lied to you and now you know it – and even the others, because they failed to persuade you.

Forget all the teachers, forget the obsolete ideologies, the dying concepts, the outdated slogans that so many still want to feed you.

Never let yourselves be intimidated by blackmail, regardless of what side it comes from.

And finally, never take lessons other than from the young fighters in Budapest, who are dying for their freedom.

They weren't lying when they cried out that freedom of spirit and freedom of work in a free nation in the heart of a free Europe are the only goods on this earth and in our history worth fighting and dying for."

Salle Wagram, March 15th 1957

On October 30th, during his speech in honour of Salvador de Madariaga, Camus publicly attacked Soviet foreign minister Šepilov and talked about a “savage intervention by the Soviet troops.”

The worst massacre was still to come, though. The Soviets would let loose in early November, causing countless victims and without the slightest regard for Hungarian national sovereignty.

It was the outcome of Yalta – every superpower had free rein within its range of action and could perform the most treacherous deeds without really having to worry about other countries stepping in.

Latin America and some European countries paid an equally high price when the leading Western power began to doubt their allegiance, and cruel fascist-like dictatorships were fostered until the mid Seventies in Europe and much later in Latin America. Underhand terrorist strategies were carried out to manipulate public opinion.

Events as grave as Hungary's didn't happen for decades. The 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia was much less bloody; on the other side, only the cruelty of the military coup organised by the CIA in Chile in 1973 against Salvador Allende and the legitimate Unidad Popular government are comparable.

For most of 1957 Camus made sure the international public opinion did not forget the Hungarian tragedy. We have mentioned the interview with the *New York Times* on February 24th, the article in the magazine *Demain* in February titled “The socialism of gallows” and his contribution in *Times* of October, “Appeal to Hungarian writers”, sent to a meeting on the matter in London.

His most vibrant speech – and the one that garnered the most resonance – was the public one at the Salle Wagram on March 15th 1957, also published in *Franc-Tireur* on March 18th with the title “Kádár a eu son jeu de peur” (Kádár has had his day of fright).

The protest sent waves around the world and Camus' words were by now unbearable for the men who had green-lighted the military intervention and had to defend it before the world's institutions; public opinion worldwide was still well aware of that dreadful deed. But only one man tirelessly rubbed the invaders' faces in the disgrace of that massacre: Albert Camus.

According to Jan Zábřana and his source, that speech cost Camus his life.

Indeed, it seems that after Camus' scathing speech against him, Šepilov personally ordered the KGB to get rid of him.

The speech was the straw that broke the camel's back: first the personal attack on October 30th, then the answer to the Hungarian writers, his stance with the United Nations, and his tireless efforts worldwide. Camus just wouldn't let it go.

Camus was still championing Hungary in 1958, when he penned a scathing foreword to *The truth on the Nagy affair*, after the head of the rebel government was gratuitously hung.

Let us see Camus' words on that fateful March 15th 1957:

“What Spain was to us twenty years ago, Hungary is today.

The subtle nuances, the plays on words, and the competent considerations still used to falsify the truth are of no interest to us.

The much-flaunted competition between Rákosi e Kádár does not matter. The two are cut from the same cloth. The only difference is their bounty and while Rákosi's may be more blood-drenched, it won't be for long. In any case, be it the bald murderer or the persecuted persecutor at the head of Hungary, it doesn't affect the country's freedom.

In this regard, I regret I have to play the part of Cassandra again and shatter the new hopes of some untiring colleagues, but there can be no evolution in a totalitarian society.

Terror doesn't evolve – it can only get worse. The gallows cannot be unregulated; the scaffold is intolerant.

Nowhere in the world have we ever seen a party or a man who, being vested with absolute power, has not used it in an absolute manner.

What defines a totalitarian society, whether it is left- or right-wing, is first and foremost the single party, and the single party has no reason to destroy itself. That is why the only society capable of evolving and achieving liberation, the only one we must give our critical and active support, is the one where the plurality of parties is an institution.

It alone enables us to denounce injustice and crime and thus to amend them.

It alone enables us today to denounce torture – despicable torture, just as despicable in Algiers as in Budapest.

The West has countless flaws; its crimes and mistakes are real. But in the end, let us not forget we are the only ones with the power of perfection and emancipation that lies within the free spirit.

Let us not forget that while a totalitarian society, by definition, forces friends to turn in friends, western society, in spite of all its miscarriages of justice, always manages to produce some men that maintain the honour of life; I mean the kind of men that hold out a hand to their very enemies to save them from tragedy or death.

When minister Šepilov, having come back from Paris, dares to write that 'Western art is destined to pierce the human soul and form slaughterers of all kinds', it's time to answer that at least our writers and artists have never slaughtered anyone and are generous enough not to blame the theory of socialist realism for the massacres covered up or ordered by Šepilov and by those like him.

The truth is that there's room for everything among us – even for evil and even for Šepilov's writers but even for honour, for the free life of desire, for the adventure of intelligence. In Stalinian culture, on the other hand, there's no room for anything other than lectures, a grey life and the catechism of propaganda. Hungarian writers have cried it out to those who still doubted it before manifesting their final choice because today they'd rather be quiet than lie by following an order

It is going to be very hard to be worthy of such sacrifices.

But we must at least make an effort in a Europe that is united at long last, setting aside our disputes, making amends for our mistakes, multiplying our creations and our solidarity.

And finally, to those who wanted to dishearten us and make us believe that history would justify terror, we will answer with our true faith, the one we now know we share with our Hungarian brothers and, yes, with the gagged Russian writers.

Our faith is what is moving around the world, parallel to a force of constriction and death that obscures history; ours is a force of persuasion and life, a massive movement of emancipation called culture, made with both freedom of creation and freedom of work.

Our daily task, our long-term vocation, is to enrich this culture with our works and not repress anything, not even temporarily.

But the task we should be proudest of is our commitment to personally defend the freedom of this culture – that is the freedom of work and creation – until the very end, against the force of constriction and death, no matter where it comes from.

These Hungarian workers and intellectuals we find ourselves side by side with today in spite of our painful powerlessness have understood it and have made us gain a better understanding.

If their suffering is also ours, then so is their hope.

Despite their misery, their exile, their chains, they have left us a splendid inheritance we must be worthy of: the freedom they didn't choose but gave us in just one day.”



A Facel Vega in front of the Hôtel de Paris et de la Poste (top) and a shot of where the same car crashed (bottom) in a recent reconstruction. Notice the long straight stretch and the sheer breadth of the carriageway in the second picture.

The images

Here, before our own eyes, are the tense, dense images of the place where Albert Camus crashed. Almost everything seems beyond time, oblivion and the fatal fading of everything. With no sound, the scene is suspended and ghostly; the faces of the onlookers show surprise, respect and the certainty they are witnessing an event that is beyond their grasp, that transcends the instant and is already moving towards history, as part of a greater design. Death lingers among those trees, on that road, in the wreck that seems to preserve the energy of the crash, the tremendous power of the impact and destruction. The events have already occurred and yet still linger on the scene of the catastrophe; everything seems to be vibrating and moving along the imperceptible trajectory of fate: a secret energy holds together the elements of the disaster, the inanimate objects in disarray, the crash, the blistering detachment; everything still remains, frozen and suspended by the energy of the tragedy, in the invisible geometry that connects every slightest fragment of the devastation.

All of a sudden a policeman, almost violating the sacral motionlessness of dead things, inspects a tyre torn from within – probably the real cause of the tragedy.

And so we remember the first headlines of the newspapers at the time that claimed the tyre was the cause of the accident, just like a recent report by *Mediapart* that confidently pointed to the tyre as the culprit of the deadly crash. Jan Zábřana's words echo louder than ever: "They rigged the tyre with a tool that eventually pierced it when the car was travelling at high speed. [...] They managed eventually and in such a way that, until today, everyone thought Camus had died because of an ordinary car crash."

The fatal journey

Camus' bibliography by Herbert Lottman is surely the most accurate and best-documented concerning the accident that cost Camus his life. Lottman earned the trust of Janine Gallimard, the wife of the publisher who also died in the crash. She and the couple's daughter were also in the car on that fateful day. She often invited Lottman over to the apartment above the offices of the publishing house for a chat. Mrs Gallimard's trust was also instrumental in retrieving small episodes and memories that would otherwise have been lost.

On January 3rd 1960, the Gallimards and Camus left Lourmarin in the late morning. They stopped for a quick lunch at Orange.

At the time there was no motorway they could take, so they travelled along what was virtually the only feasible route: first Route Nationale 7 from Avignon to Lyon, then Route Nationale 6 across Burgundy: Mâcon, Chalon, Avallon, Auxerre and Sens. From Sens they would take Route Nationale 5 (via Fontainebleau) to Paris. So their route was very easy to predict – and to monitor.

The travellers left Route Nationale 6 just before Mâcon to have dinner and spend the night in Thoissey, where there was a very nice hotel restaurant they knew well. It was called Le Chapon Fin and boasted two Michelin stars.

They had booked some rooms (something that would have been easy to intercept), since many holidaymakers were heading home and the main roads and restaurants were bound to be packed.

Mrs Blanc, the owner of the hotel, kept Camus' registration form – perhaps the last document he ever filled in and signed.

Lottman tells us that after a short rest, the travellers had dinner in Thoissey, the event soon turning into a celebration: it was Anne Gallimard's 18th birthday and Camus celebrated her with warmth and affection.

Mrs Blanc noticed the guests were happy and relaxed.

Camus spoke about his drama projects and tried to convince Michel Gallimard to let his daughter take part in the plays. Gallimard didn't want his daughter to become an actress but Camus was sure he could get her involved in his drama projects: he and little Anne trusted each other blindly.

After a lavish dinner the four spent a peaceful night; the car, however, was unguarded. It is quite likely that it was sabotaged during the night so as to cause the fatal crash.

The next morning the four had breakfast and left the hotel between nine and ten.

According to Janine Gallimard a curious exchange took place in the car. Michel Gallimard wanted to take out a life insurance policy. Camus pointed out that two men as prone to tuberculosis as them were unlikely to be granted coverage. Michel often thought about death and had no qualms speaking about it; he said he wanted to die before his wife because he couldn't live without her. Eventually, he and Camus agreed that, if they died together, they wanted to be embalmed and kept in Janine's living room so she could speak to them every day. Janine said it was a horrible thought and would rather move out of the flat.

The car rolled along at moderate velocity. Even though Michel was keen on speed, Janine didn't want him to drive too fast; even Camus reprimanded him whenever he pushed it too much.

Around lunchtime they reached Sens, a town dominated by a spectacular Gothic cathedral. Along the main road (which coincided with the Route Nationale) was the Hôtel de Paris et de la Poste, which also had a nice restaurant.

Camus was familiar with it and led the way.

The four sat in a large room with a fireplace and wood walls (according to Janine). They ordered *boudin noir aux pommes de reinette* (blood sausage with rennet apples) and a bottle of Beaujolais (according to Monsieur Sandré, the owner of the place).

They didn't stay long and were soon on their way again. Camus had an appointment with a friend, María Casares, in Paris that evening and didn't want to be late.

They carried on along Route Nationale 5, which crossed several villages after Sens. At the time the road had three lanes, the middle one being used to overtake, and was sided for long stretches by magnificent – and dangerous – plane trees.

They passed Pont-sur-Yonne and drew closer to Petit Villeblevin.

The four chatted on; Janine Gallimard was sure they weren't speeding.

Suddenly Gallimard exclaimed "*Merde!*"

Janine, who was in the back with Anne and their dog Floc, didn't hear anything else. She felt a sudden swerve and then as if something were collapsing under the car.

According to passing drivers and to another driver waiting to merge, the car zigzagged in the middle of the carriageway before crashing into a tree and ricocheting against another one thirteen metres further down, folding up like an accordion.

A witness in another car claimed he had been overtaken by the Facel Vega at 150 km per hour. He said the car was "dancing a waltz" and the crash was "like an explosion."

One version had the speedometer stuck at 145 km per hour; another had it back to nought.

As Lottman refers, "not even the experts could explain that catastrophic accident on a straight stretch nine metres wide and with very little traffic."

Lottman also claims that the photos that were taken "showed a fifty-plus metre tear in the asphalt". What caused the damage to the asphalt and which part of the car could have been involved?

The wreckage was scattered within a 150-metre radius.

The bumper and the dashboard had been ripped away and had landed nine metres from the remains of the car (mainly the rear); the radiator grille was on the other side of the road and a single wheel lay in the carriageway.

The women had ended up in a field and were virtually unharmed; Anne was twenty metres from the car and caked in mud; Floc, the dog, had disappeared and would never be found.

Michel Gallimard was in shock. When he was lifted from the ground he was bleeding profusely.

Camus had crashed through the windshield, shattering his skull, crushing his chest and fracturing his spinal cord. The passenger seat had no safety belt and because of this Camus' injuries were the worst.

Gallimard was whisked to the hospital. He couldn't remember anything; in the ambulance he asked Janine if he had been driving. He was believed to have a crushed spleen. Later, he was transferred to a hospital in Paris but died of a brain haemorrhage on January 10th during surgery.

Janine was diagnosed with a hairline fracture to a cervical vertebrae and had to wear a neck brace for months.

Camus' body was handed over to the municipality of Villeblevin.

Citizens and friends flocked to hold a wake until the next day.

Emmanuel Roblès insisted on lifting the black funeral drape to see his friend's face one last time. "Under the light of a bare bulb he had the face of a sleeping person – someone who was very, very tired. A long scratch ran across his forehead, like a final line drawn across a page."

Minister of Culture André Malraux, who was also a friend of Camus', held a commemorative speech and said: "For more than twenty years Camus was one with his obsession for justice. We bid farewell to one of the people thanks to whom France is always in the hearts of men."

When the body was buried in Lourmarin, a wreath was sent with the words: "To a friend of Hungary. By the exiled Hungarians."



Some stills from the footage shot on the scene of the crash on January 4th 1960.

The scene of the crash

The INA's silent footage from the day of the crash has become a precious relic, much like that of a sunken ship from which unexpected fragments suddenly emerge.

We can witness the devastation, the scene of the crash without its victims or the sudden tragedy that faded out leaving a debris-scattered stage.

The car was crumpled up against the second tree, having broken in two. The front part had shattered; the rear was virtually dangling from the tree but had somehow preserved its shape, saving the lives of the two female passengers.

The front grille, with the fatal words Facel and Vega on either side next to the headlights, lies on the other side of the road; it was likely torn off during the first crash.

The engine lies precariously on the hard shoulder; a part of it might be missing, having been snapped like a toy and left on the wet asphalt. Close by are the increasingly minute shards of the headlights, shattered by the violent impact.

The camera turns from the car wreck, pans across the road, frames the engine and then slowly pans down to shoot the traces on the asphalt. After crashing into the first tree, the Facel Vega shot across the carriageway before coming to its final, deadly halt.

So the first crash happened on the left side of the road, counter to the flow of traffic; the men in the front suffered a first violent impact against the steering wheel and the windshield; the front of the car was shattered. The car then spun out of control, scraping the asphalt with a very sharp damaged part, did a half-turn and then crashed into the second tree on the right side of the road, the front passenger seat – where Camus was – bearing the brunt of the impact.

The wreck was almost wrapped around the tree, as was the front axle, with its one remaining wheel; the impact on the right side, where Camus was seated, was devastating.

In the January 5th edition of *Combat*, Camus' favourite daily, it was stated that Camus' corpse was wedged between the seat and the car body (on the side of the second impact).

A second, commonly accepted version is that Camus' head smashed through the windscreen when the second crash occurred, effectively snapping his neck.

So the second crash was sideways but the car had spun on itself and was almost back-to-front, so Camus' body had almost been projected backwards.

He was the only one still in the car when the second impact occurred; the other three had probably been ejected from the car as it hurtled towards the second tree.

Combat and then *Le Monde* hypothesised that the accident had been caused by the rear left tyre exploding.

The press in general seemed to agree.

The footage shows a gendarme lifting and inspecting the ruptured wheel and part of the suspension still dangling from it; it was presumably the front left tyre, which had been struck violently during the first, almost head-on collision. The tyre is severely damaged on the inner rim – an area that generally does not suffer from wear and tear or punctures. So what caused that deep laceration?

Did that sabotaged wheel cause the car to spin out of control?

Zábrana and his source state it clearly: "They rigged the tyre with a tool that eventually pierced it when the car was travelling at high speed."

The culprits would have had another chance to sabotage the car when Camus and the Gallimards had stopped for lunch at the Hôtel de Paris et de la Poste in Sens.

Looking at a map of the area gives the shivers: the scene of the crash is just a few kilometres after Sens, at a point where the car had probably reached cruise speed and hence was travelling faster than during the previous part of the journey.

Camus had promised his long-time partner María Casares he would dine with her that evening, so they had to hurry to reach Paris in time.

In the letter he sent to María from Lourmarin a few days earlier, Camus told her he would be travelling by car; hence, he had already decided a few days before that he wouldn't take the train.

Maybe María Casares told other people and the news reached an informer; in any case, Camus had spoken to other people over the phone about his plans to come back with the Gallimards. A mere bug would've been enough to make his every move known in advance.

During the March 1997 episode of the French broadcast *Cercle de minuit*, which was dedicated to María Casares, mention was made of the letter Camus had written to her promising he'd be in Paris in time for dinner on January 4th, adding "*sauf les hazards de l'automobile*".

It was almost a tragic omen: save for any car-related risks.

Maybe he was just thinking of a possible delay but in hindsight those words take on an entirely different meaning.

The KGB's actions in Camus' times

Towards the end of his life Camus often spoke out against Stalinism and strove to denounce the Soviet invasion of Hungary to the international public. During those years, the Soviet secret services (KGB) were taken over by two ruthless men who made no qualms about killing off the Soviet Union's real or assumed enemies at home and abroad.

From 1954 to 1958 the leader was Ivan Serov, who oversaw the Hungarian invasion under orders from Khrushchev. His men boycotted talks between the Hungarian army, the rebels and the Russian troops, and executed a sneak arrest of the head of the Hungarian negotiators, General Pál Maléter, who was eventually hanged with Imre Nagy. Khrushchev himself tasked Serov with overseeing the final invasion of Hungary in early November after the first Soviet intervention fell through.

During Serov's years, foreign operations were constant and many émigrés black-booked due to their anti-Soviet actions were kidnapped. These operations weren't new, since defectors or self-exiled men had often been killed in the past.

In 1937, the NKVD had killed Ignatz Reiss (or Ignace Poretsky) in Basel, Switzerland. He had defected after the Stalinists eliminated anarchic leader Andreu Nin in Spain, having sent a letter to Stalin telling him he no longer wanted to share the highest Soviet honour with the same men who were killing off the workers and the best representatives of the Revolution.

General Walter Krivitsky, a friend of Reiss', had defected shortly after him and was killed at the Bellevue Hotel in Washington in February 1941. A fake suicide was staged.

Lev Sedov, son of Lev Trotsky, died under suspicious circumstances in Paris after undergoing surgery due to appendicitis. His father, the great revolutionary defeated by Stalin, was killed in Mexico in August 1940 by a killer sent all the way from Moscow.

Moving forward to Camus' time, in 1952 Walter Linse, who had fled the DDR in 1947 and was the head of the Free Jurists, was kidnapped in West Berlin, taken to East Berlin, tried and imprisoned. In this case the operation was carried out by DDR men following KGB orders. Linse was seen as a dangerously committed man due to his public activities abroad.

In 1953 Bohumil Laušman, a Czechoslovakian émigré since 1947, was kidnapped in Vienna by Czechoslovakian agents backed by the Soviets. The Russians provided a diplomatic car to safely carry the prisoner through Vienna and the Austrian zone under Soviet control all the way to the border.

In those years the KGB focused on the members of the NTS (Narodno Trudovoy Soyouz), the National Alliance of Russian Solidarists, which operated abroad among émigrés that opposed the Soviet regime.

NTS head Alexander Trushnovich was kidnapped in Berlin in April 1954 and sent back to the USSR.

NTS member Valeri Tremmel was kidnapped in Linz, Austria, in June 1954 and also sent back to the USSR and imprisoned.

In February 1954 a hit was put out on Georgi Okolovich, one of the NTS's leaders. The murder was to be carried out by two DDR agents under the supervision of KGB member Nikolai Khokhlov. Overcome by remorse and backed by his wife (who was eventually tried and sentenced) Khokhlov went to Okolovich and revealed the plans to kill him; he then defected and turned himself in to the Western secret services.

Khokhlov's revelations provided the CIA with plenty of information about the KGB and its secret structures for neutralizing Soviet enemies. In particular, they had two separate labs: one for developing special weapons and explosives and another for designing highly effective poisons and drugs that would make it possible to quickly eliminate targets without leaving any traces, even in the event of an autopsy.

As we will see, these two labs provided the tools for the two killings abroad ordered soon after by Bohdan Stashinski.

Khokhlov himself was almost killed during an anti-communist meeting in Frankfurt in 1957. He was poisoned with a mysterious substance; it was believed to be thallium, a very rare and dangerous radioactive substance similar to polonium, which was also used in London a few years later to lace Alexandr Litvinenko's tea and kill him. Despite the initial scepticism of the English authorities, Litvinenko managed to tell of the poisoning just before he died and so the doctors were able to locate the cause, although they couldn't save his life.

Khokhlov did survive and recover. He moved to the US, where he stayed until his death. He was pardoned by Russian president Yeltsin and allowed to visit Moscow in the Nineties.

In March 1955 Lisa Stein, a reporter for Berlin-based American radio broadcaster Rias, was almost kidnapped in West Berlin.

Stein had met up in a café with a friend who was in fact a Soviet agent. Before leaving, the friend offered her a sweet laced with scopolamine, a substance which should have acted while Stein headed home. The plan was to follow her by car and, once she fell unconscious, kidnap her and take her to East Berlin.

But by the time the scopolamine kicked in, Stein was already at her own front door. Her neighbours hurried to help her, effectively saving her. For a few days she was in critical condition and the doctors couldn't figure out what had caused her illness; she eventually recovered.

When Serov was succeeded by Aleksandr Šelepín in 1958, it was clear that the intent was to carry on along the same lines. The executions abroad continued and aggressiveness was ramped up; Serov took charge of the GRU, the military secret service.

Šelepín soon became known among his collaborators as *Zhelezni Shurik*, the Steel Alexander. He was renowned for his cruelty and ruthlessness in the pursuit of his goals. Years later he took part in the conjuration that led to the removal of party general secretary Nikita Khrushchev, his former godfather, from the head of the USSR, in favour of the neo-Stalinists led by Brežnev, who would soon have him demoted to a harmless post in fear of his influence and ambition as well as of the threat he posed.

Under his command the previous precautions by which foreign operations were usually carried out by agents belonging to satellite countries under KGB supervision were thrown out.

Šelepín ruled the KGB until 1961. The car crash that cost Camus his life happened on January 4th 1960. Camus held the speech that led to a hit being put out on him on March 15th 1957, when for the umpteenth time he spoke out against Soviet foreign minister Šepilov, who is believed to have given the order.

As Jan Zábřana wrote, "The hit was put out by the Minister of Internal Affairs Šepilov himself [...]. It is rumoured it took the secret services three years to carry out the order. They eventually did, and executed the plan flawlessly."

A 1964 CIA document concerning the KGB's executions abroad (the document was declassified in 1993) states: "The killings of emigrated leaders have been carried out so skilfully that it seems the victims have died of natural causes."

In those years, two more killings were carried out in Munich. The victims were intellectual Lev Rebet and political leader Stepan Bandera, both of them top representatives of the Ukrainian opposition abroad.

In Rebet's case, it seemed he died of a heart attack or a stroke. Bandera's death shrouded in mystery, however his condition at the time of death suggested he was poisoned.

The truth would probably have never emerged if, on the evening of August 12th 1961, just a few hours before the wall was built, a man anxious to get in touch with the American Sector authorities hadn't handed himself over to the West Berlin police.

The man was Bohdan Stashinski, a.k.a. Julius Lehmann, a KGB agent, along with his wife Inge Pohl, who was the ultimate cause of his defection. The two had taken advantage of the preparation of the funeral for their baby, who had died at just a few months, in the outskirts of East Berlin, to flee from the KGB, which had grown suspicious of them and wouldn't let them leave the Soviet Union.

They left from the back door of the house of Stashinski's father-in-law in the suburb of Dallgallow, walked all the way to the village of Falkensee and took a cab to East Berlin crossing the Friedrichsstrasse checkpoint, which they passed thanks to Lehmann's ID. They then took the S-Bahn to the Gesundbrunnen stop, the first in West Berlin, avoiding any more paper checks.

When the American agents heard Stashinski's story they realised they had in their hands a key figure who was also responsible for major, unsolved crimes. Stashinski provided them with all the details – eventually corroborated by investigations – admitting he had killed Lev Rebet and Stepan Bandera under KGB orders.

He had used a special weapon loaded with untraceable cyanide capsules. The weapon came from the Soviet labs Khokhlov had mentioned. It was a 7-inch cylinder weighing no more than 200 grams. Rebet had been killed with a single-loaded one, Bandera with a double-loaded one. It was placed very close to the victim's face to spray the cyanide which, once inhaled, paralysed the arteries shuttling blood to the brain; this caused a heart attack or cerebral paralysis and the victim would die within one or two minutes. In the next five minutes the poison would dissolve and the arteries would go back to normal, so no trace of the deadly substance could be found.

Before killing Rebet, Stashinski and his emissary carrying the weapon tested it on a dog in East Berlin. They tied it up, sprayed it and it died without making a sound after two or three minutes of unspeakable pain.

Stashinski had been given a number of pills to take before using the spray in order to protect himself in case he accidentally breathed in any of the cyanide.

On October 12th 1957, after locating Rebet and stalking him for three days, Stashinski moved in. He entered the building where the offices of Ukrainian opposition paper *Suchasna Ukraina*, edited by Rebet himself, were located and he waited for him on the first floor. When Rebet arrived he headed up the stairs; Stashinski slowly went down with the weapon concealed in a newspaper. When Rebet was just a couple of steps from him, Stashinski unloaded the cyanide right in his face and carried on down without looking back and left the building. Writhing in pain, Rebet managed to take just a couple more steps before dying in the arms of one of his collaborators

The killing had been performed flawlessly. Rebet was believed to have died of a sudden heart attack.

After tossing the weapon into a channel, Stashinski took a train to Frankfurt, where he spent the night. He then caught a plane to East Berlin and headed to the KGB head offices in Karlshorst.

Killing Bandera had been a longer, more delicate affair.

Meanwhile, Šelepín had replaced Serov at the head of the KGB but the projects and orders issued under the former carried on all the same.

Stepan Bandera, the head of the Ukrainian nationalist organisation OUN and former domestic collaborationist with the Nazis during WWII was a man of action. During the war he

had organised the Nachtigall battalion of the Ukrainian legion, allied with the Nazis, as well as the UPA, the armed wing of the OUN. After being imprisoned in the Sachsenhausen lager for insubordination to the Germans, he had been set free in 1944 so that he could work against the Soviets.

He lived under an assumed name; his well-trained organisation was said to have eliminated a number of Ukrainian émigrés suspected of being rats.

Stashinski had painstakingly stalked him out, eventually locating him during a trip to the Netherlands, where Bandera had spoken at a friend's funeral. He had then carefully followed him to Munich to figure out where the best place would be to kill him.

He eventually chose the building where Bandera lived under the name Poppel. Stashinski easily managed to duplicate the key to the building. He would go in and wait for his victim, a dangerous man.

On October 15th 1959, two years after the killing of Rebet, just when Bandera pulled up in his Opel and headed to the garage Stashinski entered the building. He went upstairs and tried to figure out whether his target, who lived on the third floor, would use the lift. A woman on her way up almost forced him to abort the operation. When Bandera approached the entry door carrying a bag of groceries in his right arm, Stashinski went down the entrance ramp towards him. Bandera opened the door with his left hand and held it open with his foot. Stashinski distracted him by asking if the lock was working and then unloaded the content of two cyanide capsules in his face before vanishing.

Bandera was found in a pool of blood on the mezzanine between the second and third floor. A number of strange bruises on his face led investigators to believe he had been poisoned.

Stashinski, meanwhile, followed his usual route through Frankfurt and the next day he was in East Berlin, where his bosses awaited him enthusiastically.

Despite the positive outcome of the operation and the accolades and honours he received from his superiors, things changed very soon when Stashinski declared he wanted to marry his German partner, Inge Pohl.

Having failed to make him change his mind, the KGB leaders green-lighted the marriage but demanded that his wife join the organisation and move to the USSR.

After putting up a lot of resistance, the woman accepted the conditions imposed on her husband. Right from the outset, however, she tried to convince him to defect to the West. She never quite managed to adapt to Soviet life and when she became pregnant insisted on giving birth in her homeland, asking her husband to abandon his.

Given the growing distrust of the KGB heads, who were always monitoring the couple and wanted to keep the man in the USSR, Stashinski seized the tragic opportunity given to him by the death by suffocation of his newborn son and caught up with his wife in East Berlin.

With his wife's help, he eventually managed to defect to the West.

The KGB's activities abroad carried on in later years as well. In London in 1978, the pacifist Bulgarian writer Georgi Markov was killed. He had moved west a few years earlier and worked on reports for BBC World Service and Radio Free Europe. His only fault was having mocked and satirised the Eastern regimes, especially in Bulgaria.

On September 7th, while he was waiting for the bus on Waterloo Bridge, he felt a prick in his calf. He noticed the man behind him pick up an umbrella and then hurry across the street and catch a cab. When he got to the office his calf was still aching and he saw there was a small red dot where it hurt. That evening he had a fever so he went to the hospital. He died three days later due to ricin poisoning.

A 1.7 mm microsphere of platinum and iridium was found in his calf; two cavities of the sphere still had traces of ricin. The sphere probably had a coating that kept the poison in and

dissolved with bodily heat, releasing the ricin in the cavities. At the time there was no antidote to ricin.

It was assumed that the sophisticated bullet had been shot from the umbrella.

Ten days earlier, in the Paris underground, another Bulgarian émigré, Vladimir Kostov, had been hit by an identical bullet shot from a bag. The man came down with a fever but survived because the microsphere had lost most of its poison during its trajectory.

The microsphere was compared with the one that had killed Markov.

A few years later, defecting agents Oleg Kalugin and Oleg Gordievsky confirmed that the murder had been set up and carried out with the support of the KGB.

We can see what sophisticated techniques they had for getting rid of inconvenient people – not necessarily dangerous enemies but sometimes mere dissidents.

It is clear what the Soviet policy was in those years of cold war against those who damaged the Soviet Union's image abroad.

Albert Camus could cause a thousand times more damage to the Soviet Union's image than any activist, intellectual or émigré from Russia, Ukraine or Bulgaria. His tireless fight in favour of the Hungarian rebels threw no end of discredit on the land of real socialism, particularly coming from a left-wing man who was so respected by everyone for his intellectual honesty. It is natural to think, then, that the USSR blacklisted him and planned on silencing him for good.

As we have seen, the Soviets went to great lengths to ensure they never came across as the ones behind the killings and to make the murders seem like accidents or natural deaths.

Maybe it was for this very reason that, as Zábřana says, it took them almost three years to get rid of Camus. "They managed eventually and in such a way that, until today, everyone thought Camus had died because of an ordinary car crash."

Time

It's been such a long time.

Silence and oblivion have inexorably covered up those days and events without anyone ever really going beyond appearances or scratching the thin, deceptive surface of things.

And yet, someone knew. Who knows how many knew. But no-one ever spoke up.

The whole world and life itself closed in on those passing deaths, even though the loss was staggering: that fearless voice with no masters and no respect for the darkest and most disgraceful acts carried out by France and by the powers that be would never again utter his limpid, crystal-clear, piercing words that thirsted for the truth. It was a massive loss and yet someone must have celebrated it in the remote chambers of power, where his words had always caused unrest.

It's been such a long time. Silence and oblivion have inexorably covered up those days and events.

The establishment wants subjects that don't ask too many questions. You can let them vote and enjoy what looks like a smattering of freedom; but the trickeries of power, the basic laws that rule armies, finance and areas of influence are unchanging and unfathomable to most. Real power and real decisions are confined to a sphere that neither the masses nor individuals can even touch.

That man dared to shatter the logic of power and domination; that man was a threat wherever he went, in whatever direction he turned his gripping, alert, piercing gaze.

His words lashed out like so many whips. He could stir consciences numbed by daily deception, by the ongoing theft of freedom, rights and information. He sought the truth of things, the human truth of the righteous who can recognise injustice, trickery, demagoguery and tyranny.

His precious words would stand forever in his books; but without hearing them, the future would move on in a vacuum and habitual arbitrary power would be unmatched; the future would be handed over to silence, to the secret hoarding of profit, invasions, murders, without a real voice to take a stand against it all, to uncover mysteries and defend men.

The page

From the page penned by Jan Zábřana there springs an invisible, secret, unquestionable certainty – there's something in the indissoluble fabric of words and events that incessantly propagates into the present the simple evidence of the truth, the unbiased list of things as they happened, the fatal, irreparable sequence of an order, of some accurate moves, of a tragedy from which there is no return.

Very few have read that page.

You can't help being moved by it; you can't escape those plane, almost hypnotic words, that concatenation of events, that cold, cruel and unbreakable logic.

Everything has happened. And that's how it happened.

The certainty of the words arises – a slow, fatal, tragic certainty that never gives in, an inner awareness of an endless delay and of a truth that is perceptible albeit hidden and almost buried by time.

By chance, a righteous man learned of that truth.

There was very little he could do. But he couldn't keep it to himself. And if his spoken word was fated to fade away into silence, then he would entrust it to writing and to time.

The very time that had choked him would one day perhaps redeem him; and those lines, those pages would see the light, life would strike them and the eyes of living men would read them; so he had to entrust that truth to time and to the future, until someone would bring air and light to his words – someone who could recognise their worth and confide in their truthfulness. Even the tanks, then, would be powerless faced with the levity of his words and their unstoppable, unbreakable dance.

Jan Zábřana was calling from that room more removed than a prison, locked up in a miserable time, in a broken life, so that someone would come from the future and understand his words, the dignity of his pain and of his defeat.

Somehow he still calls us from afar with a confident voice and bestows his gaze, his trust and the only hope he has left upon us. We can't betray him – we mustn't betray him. He lives on in our gaze and in our ability to understand his gift to us.

He never wrote lightly – he wanted to save what was worthy of his time and show us everything that the powers that be uplifted or destroyed on a whim and with obtuse stubbornness.

Albert Camus was a fair man and Jan Zábřana saw him as a blood brother. He couldn't keep quiet now that he knew the truth – he had to give it to us, whole and bare in its ice-cold precision, in that geometric and fatal concatenation of events.

Jan Zábřana was tired and disillusioned. He knew that it might all be for nought; he knew that wrongs were never righted and that tormentors always won. But he couldn't keep quiet – he had to tell us what he knew, what the world didn't know and might never know.

He was lucid and precise and didn't use a word too many. He tells things and the facts come to life before our eyes, the darkness of the past dissolves and we can see how the death machine worked to perfection, how the fatal effect was preceded by a cause, how fate simply stood by and watched the sombre manoeuvres of men.

It wasn't destiny, the symmetry of the absurd, the fate of heroes – it was a sordid machination, a blind mechanism of death that silenced the word of a righteous man, a man

who refused to sell out or become a servant, a man capable of showing the world the daily despicable acts of those in power, regardless of who they were.

After the outrage of death, the supreme ridicule of deception and silence had come.

No, he couldn't keep quiet and leave the killers in the comfortable shadow of oblivion, safe from punishment and infamy, rewarded for a vile act, defended by darkness and by everyone's indolence.

It was too much.

Prague

Perhaps someone in Prague knew.

Sure, Jan Zábřana had left behind friends, acquaintances, people who had somehow kept up with his life, his silent fight, his resistance to the times, to infamy, to betrayal. Most importantly, he had left behind the person dearest to him, the one who had looked after him and was always understanding throughout his life: his wife Marie.

Her name comes with an aura of incomparable esteem and respect. Her rigour, her dignity, her precious contribution to Czech culture make her an almost revered figure.

She is known as a limpid, utterly trustworthy person. She could help me understand and maybe would give me the key to Jan Zábřana's lost world.

But I wanted to do more than just investigate that gray area that had thrived in the shadow of power during the regime and that was bound to still have its web of influences and subtle pattern of motives.

There was, in particular, a man I could turn to for delicate matters. He had lived in Prague for ages and had prospered since the cold-war years thanks to his family being tied in with the party and able to maintain international relationships that were somehow tolerated. I knew him vicariously but I was aware of his relationships with the old secret services; his innate inclination to be informed on everything made him the ideal person from whom to source news and maybe get new contacts.

I managed to get his private number and I called him. A cold, distant voice answered, echoing with thorough self-confidence, as if he owned a superior knowledge of things and people.

He recognised me and said: "I somehow knew you'd call me one day. What can I do for you?"

I told him I'd read a very interesting story that might involve people from the previous government. Given his experience, I wanted to tell him that story and ask him if he knew about it. He seemed quite interested and his voice changed, becoming more trusting.

"Come visit me" he said. "You know where I live. If I can, I'll tell you what I know. Come tomorrow at five."

The talk

When I was led into the large living room he was at the window. He turned to greet me.

“I never get tired of watching the city from here” he said almost to himself.

The room looked out over Malá Strana and you could easily see Staré Město. The roofs and domes were almost dazzling in the afternoon light.

He told me to take a seat.

“So tell me, what have you learned and what might I know?”

I tried to tell him the story in the most enticing way I could, so as to seize his interest.

He gazed at me, squinting occasionally as if to pierce into my mind to see if I knew more than I was letting on. He didn't say a word, not even when I was done.

He rubbed his chin very thoughtfully. Then he got up and went to the window as if to check something. He sat down again and looked at me. A strange light flashed through his eyes. He smiled.

“You've found a great story. Who knows – maybe that's what really happened. The masses don't know what's going on above them. And sometimes they deserve to be kept in the dark. The motives of the dominant need not be explained to the dominated. Sure, it's been a long time. Some drugs and poisons lose their effectiveness after a while. Maybe your story is like an expired drug. And expired drugs can be harmful. So don't go telling it left right and centre.

I had heard something of the kind, too. But you never know in such cases. I can't remember whether our men were involved in that operation. I can't rule it out. In any case, the order definitely didn't come from us – we know quite well who was in charge. But we might have played a major role – after all, the mind does all the thinking but it can't do much without an arm. And we always were a very, very reliable arm.

A lot of our technicians went abroad at the time. They were very skilled and reliable. They could've pulled off a tricky operation of that kind. In fact, there's this close acquaintance of mine who dealt with that sort of stuff. And the funny thing is that he hasn't quite retired yet. I guess you never really can retire from that line of work.”

He smiled again.

“I'll call him and tell him about this conjecture of yours and the note you found. I can't promise you anything but I reckon he'd know if anything went down. In fact, I think there are very few things now that he *doesn't* know about.”

He really stressed that *doesn't*.

“Thank you” I said. “All I want is the truth – I have no wish to harm anyone.”

He almost burst out laughing.

“In that case you really are a threat – to yourself and to others. You know the Persian saying – well, horses aren't really popular gifts anymore. Anyway, I'll call you once I've heard from my contact. Or maybe he'll get in touch with you directly. Yes, that's definitely what's going to happen. I think he'll feel rejuvenated when he hears this story. I reckon you've got your hands on something precious and delicate, so make sure you don't hurt yourself – or the ones around you. It'd be a pity.

It's true that you haven't written anything yet, luckily enough – and good old Zábřana is long gone from this world. But the dead should be left in peace – all of them. Nobody's going

to bring them back and it's not a good idea to meddle with certain memories. History has already been written – I hope you don't plan on trying to rewrite it.”

He got up and held out his hand.

“Good-bye. I'm glad you came to see me.”

The contact

It was very late when the phone rang. A light trill echoed through the rooms, disturbing the still of night. I was in a sofa next to the window, reading and lulled by the constant swoosh of the rapids. I was surprised by that call – it was almost as if someone from out of nowhere had come knocking on the door.

I picked up the receiver.

“Good evening” said a low, confident voice. “I beg your pardon for calling so late, but I wanted to be sure you’d be in. A mutual friend of ours told me about you.”

“I’m surprised” I said. “Hardly anyone has this number.”

“Exactly – hardly anyone. And our job is to know things.”

“I’m sure it is. And it must be quite an interesting job.”

“It is indeed. It keeps you young and alert and open to change. Because, you know, things do change. And sometimes they change to stay the same. Anyway, I see you like observing too – and you’ve noticed some things worthy of being investigated. Our friend gave me all the details. We can meet up, if you’d like, so we can compare notes.”

“That would be great. When and where should we meet?”

“How about the day after tomorrow at four o’clock? We can meet at the Kavárna Velryba, so you feel safe. I know this is like a second home to you. And a lot of people know you – more people than you think, believe me. So bear this in mind – every move you make is out in the open.”

I didn’t answer.

“You’re right, it’s late. I don’t want to waste your time. I’ll be at the Kavárna Velryba the day after tomorrow. Have a pleasant night.”

Kavárna Velryba

I walked into the Kavárna Velryba half an hour in advance so I could find a safe corner where to make myself comfortable and have a clear view of everything as I waited for the world to reveal itself and for events to unfold. I wasn't scared and wouldn't be taken in by appearances.

Time slowed to a crawl, as did the spiralling smoke in the light filtering in through the windows. You could wait for nightfall forever in that place. The afternoon stillness was stagnating and I couldn't feel anything move; the secret energy of impending encounters faded away as the minutes passed; nothing seemed to filter in as the gears of time ground on, driving the irreparable motion of things. I was waiting for something that wouldn't come; it was hiding, holding back, perhaps to suggest its power and unfathomable control.

I sought solace in the habitual gestures and sounds that secretly kept the place alive – but something kept me down, beyond the peaceful margin of life, where there is nothing but the emptiness of waiting.

An hour had gone by since the meeting was scheduled; I had finished my *turecka* so I started leafing through the papers on the sill. And just when I was about to leave, a smart man appeared on the steps of the Kavárna Velryba. He didn't look very familiar with the place; he went down the steps and looked around, as if he couldn't see the person he was meant to meet.

He was holding a pile of papers and a white envelope.

He stopped on the threshold leading to the bathrooms and the tearoom, looking thoughtful. He glanced at his watch and then turned to look at the road, hesitating all the time. He looked anxious.

Then he moved towards the bar, zigzagging among the tables barely more than a metre from me. And just then he accidentally dropped the envelope, which landed on the floor next to me.

He bent down to pick it up, dusted it off and lay it on my table. Then he looked at me and smiled slightly, as if to excuse himself. Without a word and almost looking preoccupied, he slowly went towards the stairs. He turned for a second and then climbed the stairs and left without a sound.

For an instant I couldn't quite figure out what had happened. I looked out of the window but couldn't see him. I knew then that he wouldn't be back.

I instinctively seized the envelope. It wasn't sealed. I opened it.

In it was a high-quality picture taken with a telescopic lens. I could see a sole person leaving a building; he was almost in the foreground. And there was no mistaking it – that person was me.

The phone call

I was sure I'd get another call. And two days later I did, once again late at night.

It was the same voice, the same mock merriness and the same feigned good mood.

"Good evening" he said.

"Good night" I answered. "I see you have a lot of respect for my habits."

He laughed unpleasantly and coughed.

"The other day there were still some things that needed checking out and we couldn't talk to you securely. But as you can see, we didn't leave you on your own and in fact we've shown you undivided attention."

I didn't answer. This obviously surprised him, so he tried to prod me.

"I can't say we didn't know who you are but we thought it would be wise to look into your habits – and your contacts."

"I'm flattered. Have you figured out which side I look best from? And how much sugar I put in my coffee? I'm sure you've unearthed some pretty useful stuff."

He didn't seem to appreciate my words. He retorted dryly:

"Maybe it's time to have you talk to someone who gets down to business. Let me point out that we have no intention of helping you or even of validating your theory. All we want to do is give our version of the events. It's in our interest that certain historical truths remain as they are and that certain essential ideas are safeguarded. All attempts to upset any of this will be met with direct consequences. But I hope you don't plan on subverting consolidated historical truths."

"I have no intention of the kind" I answered. "All I want is to investigate certain theories. And they're not theories of my own – I read about them and you can too. I've always been very perplexed about the freedom of press. Sure, back in the day things were easier; but we can still do something now. Anyway, while you decide what to do, is there any chance of me speaking with your man?"

"I see you're fretting to hear our sources. That's good. I can make an appointment for the day after tomorrow, at Café Slavia, in the morning. Our man isn't too keen on your college student haunts – he's more into other things."

"Good for him. It must mean he's always been on the right side. I'd appreciate it if you could refrain from making me wait around for nothing this time."

"Don't worry – it won't be a waste of time, I can assure you."

"Good night."

"Good night."

A talk at Café Slavia

It was late morning and Café Slavia was almost empty. The odd tourist gazed at the selection of hot chocolate and pastries, breathing in the warm aroma in the hope of finding traces of a long-gone past. I gazed at the trams rolling by at the crossing – that hypnotic, eternal gliding of theirs beyond generations and men, promising endless movement along the river, the city, the outlying neighbourhoods, the future.

My contact appeared out of the blue as I was caught up in my own thoughts. He sat in front of me without a word, with the dogged silence of a man who doesn't need to ask anything.

He smiled and then whispered, "Here I am."

We'd never met and yet I could tell from his body language that he knew me and had full command over what concerned me. He asked me mockingly if I'd found anything I liked the day before at an *antikvariát* in Vinohrady.

I answered that the package I'd walked out with showed I had.

After a short silence he decided it was time to talk about the issues I'd laid out on the table – that restless, dogged past lying under the sediment of time and yet pulsing away, demanding its own light were it even in the vain present of the living.

The summer of 1980 was stifling – the heat and an air of perpetual imprisonment following Charter 77, the turns of a screw, the increasingly obsessive monitoring of everything that might be a hotbed of opposition or rebellion. With dogged resignation, Zábřana always went to his favourite cafés. He'd often spend time at the Malešice pub just outside his house, then he'd move to the town centre; he patronised Waldek in Václavské Náměstí as well as another café in Náměstí Míru; he'd even come here to the Slavia to play chess with some other patron.

Who knows – maybe he met his source here. But Václavské Náměstí is more likely. They'd meet up every now and then when the other guy came back from Moscow, took a break from his studies or repaid a favour to those who gave him so much freedom.

Zábřana's work as a translator had earned him several contacts with American scholars; in fact, we long doubted the exact identity of his sources and the actual nature of the information he received. It was always stuff having to do with literature and maybe a smattering of politics with no objective proof, but it was our job to look into every single thing.

We're pretty sure the talk took place towards the end of summer. His informer was about to come out with an important book for his own career. Maybe he was over-excited; maybe he thought the limitations of common citizens didn't apply to him and that the confidential information he owned could be passed on safely. Whatever the case, he told Zábřana about that operation, going into every detail and not bending the truth in the slightest, even though twenty years had passed. In fact, it was all so accurate that Zábřana asked him where that information came from. At this point he became hesitant – he couldn't rattle off his list of contacts and how they were connected. So he simply assured him that the source of the information was completely reliable and very close to the higher-ups who had carried out the operation.

Zábřana was deeply shocked but circumstances were on our side: his daily worries drew his focus elsewhere. It was an especially tough time in literature and politics, and the events went back twenty years so he had virtually no way of spreading the news in a credible manner.

Furthermore, the source realised he'd made a mistake opening up like that and told Zábřana it wasn't something to mess with and to keep every word of that conversation to himself, assuring Zábřana he would never admit to anything if the information leaked.

Zábřana wrote down what he'd heard in his diary and somehow ended up burying what he knew, without ever forgetting it. Maybe he was waiting for the right moment – but it would never come. The burden of his fatalism, his distrust in the present, his almost mortal certainty that nothing would change for generations led him to believe that the truth could no longer win and that the famous saying pravda vítězí had also been condemned by history and by something more powerful.

And in any case who would ever believe him? What proof did he have? He'd been let in on a secret by a scholar whose very freedom made him all the more suspicious and who would in any case deny those words; he couldn't prove anything. He had nothing to go on and risked terrible consequences.

No, Zábřana couldn't act then and there; everything conspired to make him even more of a fatalist and believe the truth was impossible to know, let alone to spread, and that the masters, the occupiers, were there to stay for centuries if not forever.

It was over.

It was all over and he knew it.

The café was empty again and the man had vanished quickly after a brief phone call.

He had told me: "I'll get in touch with you. Don't trust the wrong people. And don't go prying around too much – the past never dies for good. It can still come back."

In that quiet room visited by the morning light as the muffled screeching of the trams echoed throughout, I was moving through a nameless time and without any exact coordinates. The eternity of things showed itself, the river the theatre the road, the light the tables the silence; the world's spheres spun away painlessly and effortlessly; a solitary man downed his early-morning shots; slender hourglasses of light stood out; a lady crossed the threshold of habit or time ordering coffee and pastries, leafing through the newspapers as if to try her luck; I felt the gravitation of everything around me as the irony of creation scattered every destiny like dust on a road.

Marie Zábranová

It was time to talk to Marie Zábranová.

We'd first met years before and just for a few minutes; little did I know that one day fate would bring us together again along with the ghost of Jan Zábrana. He would often return to the present in the lives of many thanks to the unbreakable strength of his words, in his room besieged by the times, by power, isolated almost in a vacuum, while life carried on for everyone else and left him mere instants to complete his long, timeless testament.

We met at a crossing in the centre of Prague – it was a place I loved despite the chaos and noise, for it was always brimming with life; and even at its quietest, it always exuded a secret energy.

We recognised each other instantly. We were both fearful of the time that had past and both felt this meeting was important, that the darkness of time was converging right there, at that hour and along those very roads.

We sat in a café in the shadow of a quiet courtyard.

I had already told her over the phone why I wanted to meet her and had detailed how important that passage I had retrieved from silence was. However, for a few minutes we found it hard to broach the topic – there was something extremely fragile and delicate between us, like the ashes of a lost life that refused to give in, unbreakable as it was and ready to face the future, the lives of others, the memory of those who knew, as well as the indifference of those who couldn't or didn't want to remember.

Little by little, almost as if she were pulling them out of thin air, Marie Zábranová gathered the first fragments of the past, the places, the scenes, the instants lived by Jan Zábrana when they spent their lives together.

I listened and took notes and every now and then I'd remember something. It felt as if the past were suddenly eating up the distance separating us from him and that the narrated facts and events had happened just a few days earlier and that Jan Zábrana was there, just around the corner, waiting to pop up and take a seat next to us.

Every now and then Marie would stop, her hardships of the time coming through in her breathing, her anxiety, the sudden pauses in her flow.

Only a few places from those times stood out and recurred in her recollection: the Malešice pub, the house, the places in Náměstí Míru and Václavské Náměstí, the Slavia café, where one would mince words and speak in whispers because there could be bugs all over the place.

At the time, talking over the phone was unthinkable: everything was monitored and sometimes you could actually hear the hiss of the interception, like an open window. Some were daring enough to say hello to the unmistakable noise of the person listening in. In other cases you could tell someone was spying because the speaker's voice echoed slightly. "Just imagine" she said, "that when you called me last night I clearly heard that echo. Who knows, maybe it's going to happen again. The past never really dies."

I thought I'd already heard that sentence – from the powers that be, though.

Zábrana had led a peaceful life. Most of the time he was either writing or translating. He spent a lot of time at home, surrounded by books and papers, in an impregnable area that no one – not even Marie – could enter. And in that strange, controlled disorder he always knew exactly where to find a sheet of paper, a book or a note. His papers were precious and

untouchable, just like the notebooks that made up his diary, that quietly stayed with him throughout the years and that only towards the end of his life, when his days were numbered, were shown to Marie for what they were: Jan's silent and incessant battle against his times, against the obtuse hand of the regime that stifled his talent and his ideas and forced him into anonymity as he celebrated a handful of hopeless servants, ministerial scribblers, pale unenlightened realists, hirelings faithful to the cultural line.

His was a lost cause but he projected his work into the future, betting everything on the unknown, on the time after him, on the new atmosphere that was bound to come eventually, like that brief spurt in 1968 but this time forever.

The masters were still there but time was digging away beneath their boots and the treads of their tanks – that very time that made civilisations as well as oppression and tyranny crumble. Time had become his refuge and now time was betraying him. Time was no longer on his side. Sure it would bring down that iron curtain concealing so many lives but he wouldn't be there to see that day he'd been after for decades.

It was a lost cause but Marie was still there and so were the words he'd dedicated to the unflinching honour he and his parents had upheld even in defeat. He hadn't followed the legion of servants and he had paid for it. But his honour and dignity were unscathed and his tireless memory had saved, sorted and catalogued almost thirty years of his daily life and of his country's real history. Even the masters would pass but not his diary: it was a crazy hope and perhaps nothing more than a delusion, but he had righteousness on his side: the righteousness of the ones driven not by power but by the will to see when everyone else wants to forget.

He was Jan Zábřana.

He was never a servant.

Hopeless battle corrodes, wears out and destroys.

His illness was quick and didn't give him a second chance or any extra time. Time had abandoned him.

He showed his notebooks to Marie, telling her how crucial and dangerous they were. He had been very cautious, often rubbing out names and circumstances and leaving out dates and places. But all the events were still recognisable; some names just couldn't be concealed. Many people would be in danger if those diaries ended up in the wrong hands. But with Marie they were safe: she was cut from the same cloth as him; she wouldn't give in and she wouldn't make any mistakes. Their times had also bred indestructible people who could withstand the worst.

Marie kept all his papers safe and resisted quietly until the years grew shorter and shorter, crumbling and blowing away the masters and their servants. Bit by bit, there was room again for people to speak freely without being censored or having to fear for their well-being. Jan Zábřana's time was back.

When his diaries were published, an army of shadows flocked to buy them: some had long kept quiet and could now hear the voice of the lost years, the piercing words that couldn't be cried out, the firm judgment that didn't fear authority and lies.

When she was done, Marie looked at me as if she were momentarily scared of what she had recalled, of the immense darkness of a past that stretched up to yesteryear. But she snapped out of it right away. She sat up and once again showed that solidity, that unbreakable firmness that had enabled her to resist and defeat dreadful powers.

Suddenly, as if to focus on a more important issue, she pushed back the images of the past to tackle a central issue: who were her husband's interlocutors? As far as she could recall, only three men had access to reliable information from Moscow; all three had often travelled to and lived in Moscow and would have had the right contacts to retrieve classified information.

One was a great literary historian, one was a migrated sociologist and one was a very experienced translator from Russian.

Only one of them was still alive and could still give his account. The other two could no longer speak to us.

The sources

Born Jiří Gibian, George Gibian was a Czech-American professor of Russian and comparative literature. He had taught at Cornell University from 1961 to 1999. He was born in Prague in 1924 and in 1939, following the Nazi occupation, had moved to St Edmund's College in Hertfordshire. In 1940 his family moved to the US.

After graduating from Pittsburgh University he joined the army in 1943, taking part in the 94th infantry division that landed in Normandy in 1944. He was then assigned to the Third Army of General Patton and received a bronze star.

He read at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies and earned a Ph.D. in comparative literature at Harvard in 1951. He taught at Smith College until 1959 and at California University in Berkeley from 1959 to 1960. In 1961 he joined the Russian literature department of Cornell University.

He often travelled to the Soviet Union and to East Europe, especially Czechoslovakia. Czech intelligence reports state that in 1974 he was in Prague to meet Milan Kundera, who would flee to Paris the following year.

He often met up with Jan Zábřana in Prague. In 1975, on his way back from Moscow, he stopped in Prague and, as Marie Zábřanová recalls, he and her husband got together. They always kept in touch until 1984, just before Zábřana's death.

He might have been the source of the information concerning Camus' accident.

Unfortunately he died at his home in Ithaca, US, on 24th October 1999.

He'll never be able to tell us about Jan Zábřana, Prague in the Seventies and, perhaps, Albert Camus.

Jiří Zuzanek, a professor at the Canadian university of Waterloo, might be able to answer a few questions on the past.

Marie Zábřanová talked to him over the phone when the Camus case went international. Profesor Zuzanek said he didn't know anything about it and wasn't the one who had spoken to Jan Zábřana about the episode.

Professor Zuzanek graduated in Sociology in Prague. He left Czechoslovakia in 1968 following the Soviet invasion. He spent years teaching at Waterloo University, where he is still professor emeritus. His most important book is *Work and Leisure in the Soviet Union: a Time-budget Analysis*, published in 1980.

Zuzanek is fluent in Russian; he often travelled to the Soviet Union and in the years of Prague had a reputation for being very well informed on national and international facts as well as being close to pro-Soviet circles.

But his direct answer to Marie Zábřanová may be his final word on the matter, although it doesn't rule out that he may have been the actual source of the information.

The third person Marie Zábřanová believed might have told her husband about the Camus incident was Jiří Barbas, an experienced translator from Russian into Czech. Unfortunately he died a few years ago and cannot answer our questions.

Marie Zábřanová recently spoke to Barbas' wife, who claimed her husband was well acquainted with what went on in the Soviet Union and might very well have been Zábřana's source. There's no certainty, though.

Other people in his circle have told Marie Zábranová that Barbas might have been her husband's informer, given his solid web of contacts in the Soviet Union. Marie referred this widespread opinion in an interview to the Czech national radio.

Josef Škvorecký, a renowned Czech writer who migrated to Canada and the author, in his youth, of four joint novels with Jan Zábrana, gave his opinion during a call to Marie Zábranová. He said that Zábrana was close friends with Russian writer Vasilij Aksënov, who was thoroughly informed on Russian and Soviet goings-on. So he might have been Zábrana's source. Unfortunately Aksënov died in Moscow two years ago.

Time is quickly washing over most of the protagonists of that age. Fewer and fewer people are left to tell us about those years that were so pivotal for Europe's fate. And there will be fewer and fewer chances to find out the truth about certain crucial events.

Marie Zábranová's story

I met Marie Zábranová again.

The landslide of memories frozen in time had been released and was gathering speed. All it had taken to jolt it was the attempt to remember, the summoning of ghosts that seemed gone for good, remembering acts that seemed to have been carried out in an eternal present. The past decades and the shift in the world's balance of power now enabled those suspended lives to resurface in her conscience. Sure, there was no going back to change even a hint of the past; but at last that great, unbreakable time could be told, that time that had been preserved in the memory, safe from the brunt of passing ages and the threat of dark ages that always seemed ready to come back and cast their shadow of danger and suspicion even on the new order built on the old masters.

Marie wasn't too keen on phone calls.

She spent her life knowing someone else was listening in, whether she was at home, at work or just talking to her close friends. When you spend every day of your life under threat, it becomes hard to trust new circumstances and hope that life will give you a break or even protect you.

Recently, after the uproar caused by the publication of her husband's writings, she thought she could hear the same echo on the phone that used to mean someone was listening in. There's no way to tell for sure now but the survival of consolidated methods can't be ruled out in most former Warsaw Pact countries, especially the former USSR countries, where the veil of democracy is increasingly thin and laughable.

Marie claimed that Jan Zábrana's path crossed with that of a crucial figure in the cultural debate of the Fifties and Sixties: Boris Pasternak's.

Jan Zábrana was especially fond of *Doctor Zhivago* and went out of his way to translate it into Czech. As the years went by and the political situation changed, he started to believe he could do it. It would be a long fight but he was sure he could win.

The fortune of that novel and its author were also tied to Albert Camus' work. He pressured the Nobel Prize jury so that Pasternak would be the next winner of the prize Camus had won the year before.

It is quite singular how the lives of Zábrana, Camus and Pasternak crossed: their integrity, their freedom of spirit, their common pursuit of human and artistic truth was fruitful and fatal for all here. The history of those years and Soviet power conspired in different ways to silence them and annihilate them. Their fate was tragic but the fruit of their creation has stood the test of time and resisted the very power that repressed their work and decided their fates.

Camus and Pasternak

There are two threads we can follow in Marie Zábránová's story and in the lives of these authors. One has to do with the relationship between Camus and Pasternak, who exchanged several letters; the latter eventually won the Nobel prize in 1958 as Camus grew more and more hostile to the Soviet regime. The other has to do with the almost novel-like events that enabled Jan Zábřana to translate *Doctor Zhivago* into Czech.

Albert Camus was a long-time admirer of Pasternak. In his Nobel acceptance speech he had mentioned "the great Pasternak". He appreciated his work as a whole and planned on writing a play based on Pasternak's *Slepaja Krasavica (The Blind Beauty)*. The uproar caused by *Doctor Zhivago* and the outrage caused in Europe by the hardships it went through in the Soviet Union as well as the sheer power of Pasternak's narration further convinced the author's European supporters to push for him to be awarded the 1958 Nobel prize.

The book was ready in early 1956 but Pasternak was aware that it was "virtually impossible to publish" in the Soviet Union, at least at the time. Still, he gave a copy of the manuscript to the publishing office of the magazine *Novyj Mir*, with little hope of it being accepted.

He printed a few more copies and gave them to his most trusted friends. These included Isaiah Berlin, French PhD student Jacqueline de Proyart (who eventually got permission from Pasternak to represent it abroad), and most importantly Sergio D'Angelo, who passed it on to Giangiacomo Feltrinelli. Feltrinelli immediately realised how monumental the book was and set to work to get an exclusive contract with Pasternak. He managed even though the writer didn't want to preclude other avenues, and so a long battle to publish the book began against the will of the Soviets and the perplexities of the Italian communists.

After a long tug-of-war and despite oppositions and flatteries of all kinds, Feltrinelli reached his objective and on November 23rd 1957 the novel came out in Italy, translated by Pietro Zveteremich and titled *Il dottor Zivago*.

The book immediately became a best-seller and publishers all across Europe scrambled to follow in Feltrinelli's steps.

On June 23rd 1958 the book was published in France by Gallimard.

On June 9th 1958 Camus, who was aware of the book's troubled publication since he was an editor at Gallimard, wrote to Pasternak expressing his great admiration and hinting at the support he was willing to give him. It was no coincidence that the letter came with a copy of his acceptance speech, where he explicitly praised Pasternak. It was a sign of the investiture Camus had decided to attribute to him for the 1958 Nobel prize.

Discreetly but without ever concealing his opinion in public, Camus championed Pasternak's candidature for the Nobel prize and encouraged other intellectuals to support the Russian writer as well.

At the time Camus, who was already very well known and a fresh Nobel prize recipient, was probably the most influential and listened-to intellectual in the world. His figure as a righteous man always in pursuit of justice, his fight against dictatorships and his defence of the oppressed worldwide made him an exemplary figure respected and esteemed everywhere. His words and opinion were of immeasurable weight; his support to Pasternak was yet another blow to Soviet power after the clamorous and unrestrained protest he had stirred up following the invasion of Hungary.

Camus took a stand yet again, this time to hinder the Soviet efforts to stifle the outrage caused by Pasternak's book. He had become the Soviet nemesis, the most influential and forward-thinking intellectual in Europe (and possibly the world); he treated French communists like puppets, brought out the disdain of the public opinion for the Hungarian massacre and now fuelled the flames of a scandal that from literary had turned political and helped to destroy any delusion of a post-1956 de-stalinization.

Maybe the Pasternak case really was the straw that broke the camel's back – it proved that Camus was a sworn enemy and it was time to get rid of him

This is the letter Camus wrote to Pasternak on June 9th 1958.

Dear Boris Pasternak,

My best friend, René Char, gave me your address because he knows how much I admire and respect your work and the man I feel lives therein. I wanted to send you a short text whose only purpose is to act as a sign of commitment, however from afar. [Camus' Nobel acceptance speech follows].

We are among those in France who know you and, in a certain way, partake in your life.

I would be nothing without 19th century Russia and in you I find the Russia that nurtured and strengthened me.

It's false to say there are no borders. They do exist, albeit temporarily. But there also exists a force of creation and truth that brings us all together, both in humbleness and in pride.

I had never perceived you better than when I read your work and for this I would like to express my gratitude and solidarity.

I wish you, your loved ones, your work and your great country all the best.

I shake your hand.

Albert Camus

On June 28th Pasternak answered, beginning thus:

Dear sir,

I can barely believe that I'm writing to you, Camus.

My life has turned a new page and now I have the pretext, the right, the chance to tell you how passionate and grateful I am for the unique nuance in the play of universal thought that you have brought to me.

He ended thus:

You are worried about what might happen to me and forget that no award is comparable to this new bond that deserves to be lived to the fullest, even at the cost of suffering.

Thank you, thank you for everything.

The letter was unsigned. Pasternak never signed his letters, hoping it would help him bypass censorship.

On August 14th Pasternak wrote Camus another letter, asking if he had received the first one. Here he sounds even warmer and more brotherly, and hints that he didn't necessarily expect an answer from Camus but even just a sign or news and that he was grateful all the same.

This is how the letter begins:

My dear, great friend,

Where can I find the words to express my deep gratitude for the rare support that I get from your mere existence, the order of ideas that is so typical of you, your way of seeing things, your work, your being? I must say, not without a speck of immodesty, how much our affinity of ideas strikes me.

There was very little time left to apply for the Nobel prize and, even though it wasn't official, there was a major problem: *Doctor Zhivago* had been published in Italian and French but not in the original Russian. Lacking a Russian edition, the Nobel board couldn't award the prize to Pasternak.

The race to make him win his battle had begun much earlier, though. Feltrinelli was preparing a Russian text to be published in Italy and, basing his work on the copy owned by Jacqueline de Proyart, he was progressing nicely with the help of Dutch publisher Mouton.

Some scholars say the Mouton edition was pushed by the CIA, which would further spread the book in October 1958 at the Brussels Expo, where several Russian copies of the book without the original frontispiece were made available.

Indeed, apparently authorised by Feltrinelli, on August 24th 1958, just in time for Pasternak's application and right before the Italian edition came out, the Russian edition by Mouton became available, the first page being glued on and featuring the title of the book and the publisher's brand (in Cyrillic): "G. Feltrinelli, Milan".

Pasternak's application had been saved and Soviet irritation grew further, since the Russian text could now reach the nomenclature as well as the intellectuals and all those who could travel abroad.

It seems that the CIA's supposed involvement with the Mouton publication had to do with the text's composition, which was carried out in collaboration with a non-official section of the CIA in Europe, the CUPE (Central Union of Post-war Emigres).

There are different versions about how the CIA got its hands on the text. One mentions an unscheduled stop-over of a flight over Malta, a British protectorate. The CIA agents took advantage of the stop-over to make a copy of a book found in a suitcase, without the owner noticing. In fact, it is likely that several copies made it to the West and for the American or British intelligence it wouldn't have been hard to get their hands on one.

Shortly after the Mouton edition came out, Feltrinelli also published a Russian version that was long available in Italy and, as we shall see, eventually made its way into Jan Zábřana's hands.

On October 23rd 1958 the efforts of Camus, Feltrinelli and of all those who had believed in his book came to fruition as Boris Pasternak was awarded the Nobel Prize.

Unfortunately, this triggered a very violent reaction within the USSR.

Failing to realise that the brutality of the repression would damage their image far more than any novel ever would – and *Doctor Zhivago* was not even anti-Soviet – the official reactions mercilessly followed the consolidated Stalinian methods.

On October 26th the *Literaturnaja gazeta* published a scathing article by David Zaslavskij; the students of the Humanities course were encouraged to sign a petition against Pasternak and his novel. A "spontaneous rally" was then organised for them to demand that the writer be exiled from the Soviet Union. On October 29th, at the central committee of the League of Young Communists, on the occasion of the Komsolov's 40th anniversary, Vladimir Semichastny, future head of the KGB starting in 1961, verbally assaulted Pasternak, calling him a pig. Khrushchev looked on and applauded along with thousands of other people. It is believed that the most offensive passages of his speech were fed to him by Khrushchev, who loved going against the traditional forms of communication, often veering into vulgar territory.

Pasternak was assured that if he went to Stockholm to accept the award he would never be allowed to come back to Russia. Immediate threats were also made to his beloved Olga

Ivinskaha, who due to her bond with Pasternak had already spent four years in a labour camp under Stalin and had lost the baby she carried when she was arrested.

This was almost too much to bear for Pasternak and he even contemplated taking his own life.

After some terrible days in which his wife and his loved one tried to convince him to give up the Nobel prize, a shattered Pasternak sent a second wire to Stockholm after the first one in which he expressed his gratitude. This time he told them he had to decline the award due to the meaning it had for the society he lived in.

In the following days, despite his step back, Pasternak still suffered persecution. The Writers' Union often assaulted him through the press and on October 31st a closed-door trial was held to decide on Pasternak's banishment. Furthermore, a petition at the Politburo was set in place to revoke Pasternak's citizenship and have him exiled to the West.

Pasternak was devastated. His health was seriously compromised. In fact, it is likely that the seeds of his final illness had been sown.

In January 1960, just a few months before dying, the journalist Olga Andreeva-Caslisle met him in his dacha.

It was probably one of his last talks with someone from the West.

The journalist told him that Camus had died in car crash just a few days earlier.

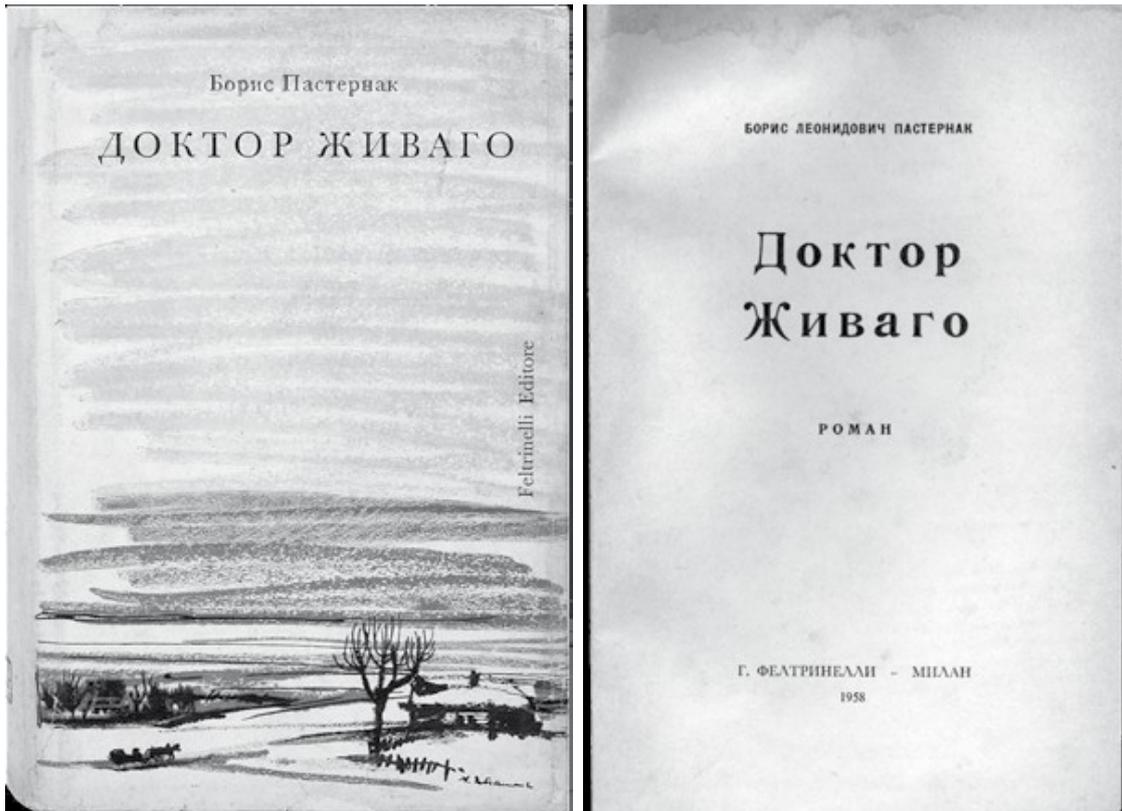
Pasternak was grief-stricken.

He hadn't heard anything about the accident.

Camus' works weren't translated in the Soviet Union and the media hadn't given news of the crash.

As far as the Soviet powers were concerned, Camus no longer existed.

Boris Pasternak died late on May 30th 1960, apparently because of lung cancer and shortly after the death of the man who perhaps, ideally, had been the closest to him in his final years.



Left: the cover of the Russian edition of Doctor Zhivago, published by Feltrinelli in 1958. Right: the title page of the contemporary edition by Dutch publisher Mouton (notice the Feltrinelli brand in Cyrillic).

In pursuit of *Doctor Zhivago*

Marie Zábránová is a strict, sometimes even severe person. Her sharp, unflinching gaze seems to be looking for the truth and the sense of past and present in things. Her memory is of iron, with time and events crystallised therein as if she had to save them for the future, for a time in which history could really judge the living and the dead with fairness.

Remembering is sometimes painful to her; you can tell it from her face even though her expression is always composed and her voice firm. When she's happy she beams, showing how hope and generosity have never left her despite the sometimes tragic hardships she's had to face.

She speaks warmly about how hooked her husband Jan was after reading just a part of *Doctor Zhivago*. He wanted to translate it into Czech but had no idea of the hardships he and Marie would have to live through for the sake of that book.

In 1963 Zábrana had managed to get a microfilm of the Russian text, but it was very hard to make out. So he had begun, out of sheer enjoyment, to translate a part of it, without really thinking about getting it published. He had translated the chapters "Varykino" and "Epilogue", the easiest to make out on the microfilm. He was hoping to get the whole Russian text, which was nowhere to be found in Czechoslovakia.

At long last, in spring 1965 that long-awaited glimmer of hope came. His wife Marie, who was an editor at the Odeon and of the magazine *Světova Literatura*, was invited along with all the editorial staff to take part in a cultural trip to Italy. The participants included art historian Jaromír Neumann, artist Adolf Born and Odeon editor-in-chief Jan Řezáč. The delegation of the Odeon, the main Czech publishing house, would travel by bus to a number of northern Italian places of artistic interest, going as far as Florence.

It would be a once-in-a-lifetime chance to buy the Russian text of *Doctor Zhivago* published in Italy by Feltrinelli. It would also be a chance to meet Fernanda Pivano, whom she often wrote to. Allen Ginsberg had stayed with the Zábranas in Prague and had written Pivano a letter to introduce her to his Czech friends. Ginsberg was among the authors translated by Zábrana and, after visiting Prague and consolidating his friendship with Jan, was unfortunately expelled from the country. He casually told the policemen escorting him to the border that he owed Mr Zábrana some money and asked if he could give it to him.

In late April 1965, Marie, who had given birth to little Eva in October 1964, left for Italy with a huge responsibility and knowing she'd have to take some risks. The group was accompanied by an interpreter guide, who had clearly been tasked with monitoring their every move and report any improper behaviour to the authorities. Furthermore, there was no way to be sure all the travellers could be trusted; indeed, Marie suspected there might be other potential informers among them.

Any move she made on behalf of her husband would have to be carried out on her own, away from all the other travellers.

In the centre of Milan she managed to meet Fernanda Pivano, who at the time lived in Via Manzoni. She told her about her husband's plan to translate *Doctor Zhivago*. Pivano had a good relationship with Feltrinelli and would certainly act as a go-between so that the rights to the book could go to Czechoslovakia as well. It was a merry and fruitful meeting and both agreed on how important it was to get the novel published in as many countries as possible.

In Venice, Marie met Sergio Molinari, an Italian professor of Russian literature who was also teaching at the University of Prague and with whom the Zábranas were friends. They met close to Piazza San Marco and spent some forty minutes chatting on a bench. But someone saw them and two months later, Marie was called in by the secret police and drilled about the meeting. They said that Molinari was believed to be a spy and a treacherous man. Marie retorted by telling them he often stayed at their place in Prague and was the farthest thing from a spy or secret agent. Given her obvious peace of mind, they let her go with no further consequences.

When they got to Florence, Marie carried out the first part of her project.

She had brought along a golden brooch given to her by Jan when their daughter was born. She would have to give it up to get the book. She went to a gold merchant close to Ponte Vecchio and traded in the brooch. It was a tough decision and a sad moment – but Jan's wish for *Doctor Zhivago* was more important. In exchange for that beloved object she got precious Italian currency she could use to buy the book. The journey had been planned very strictly and the group were travelling with hardly any foreign currency.

The next step was to get the book. Being in a foreign language that very few understood, its circulation was limited.

She eventually found it in Bologna.

She could hardly believe she was holding that book she and her husband had been after for years. She bought it and hid it among other harmless books in her bag.

Soon they would be heading home and the joy for clinching her plan was dampened by fear. *Doctor Zhivago* was forbidden in the Soviet Union and customs checks were bound to be exacting. Jan had warned her there might be consequences. Then Marie had an idea. Seeing all her colleagues buying souvenirs of their trip, she decided to make a purchase too: with what money she had left she bought a pram for her daughter back in Prague. The pram would be her Trojan horse.

When the Odeon bus reached the border the customs officers boarded it to investigate the luggage. They hardly even looked at the books but were sure to thoroughly search the pram in every single detail. After examining it from top to bottom, they left. The book was saved.

At long last, Jan could read the whole novel and set to work translating it.

They got in touch with Feltrinelli through the publishing house Československý Spisovatel to get the rights, thanks also to the precious help of Fernanda Pivano.

By May 1967 they knew for sure the novel would be published.

Times were changing and the country's political situation wasn't quite as dismal; government control and censorship was loosening up. Little did anyone expect that fateful 1968 so full of joy, freedom and hope where everything seemed possible.

Despite the more relaxed climate, Jan had bad omens and tried to speed up the translation.

He acted as if he had a deadline, as if every day dark omens drew closer. His tension was sometimes palpable, almost as if something told him fate wasn't on his side.

By the end of 1967 he had translated two thirds of the book. On April 1st 1968, in the middle of the Prague Spring, he signed a contract with the publisher. Jan had just about completed his first draft of the translation but was pleased only with part of it, so he set to work on revising his own translation.

In the summer of '68 it seemed freedom had been conquered again. The people of Prague lived their merry illusion with indescribable enthusiasm. Jan could sense danger, though, and didn't trust the ruling class, not even the men who had made the Spring happen.

His foreboding turned out to be right. On the night between August 20th and 21st 1968 the Soviet troops, with the help of the forces of the "brother" countries of the Warsaw pact, invaded Czechoslovakia.

Even though he had never bought into the merry atmosphere of the last few months, Jan was devastated. As it had often happened in his life, all he could do was expect the worst. When Dubček returned from his “captivity” in Moscow and spoke to the nation, it was obvious that he was still a virtual prisoner. His voice was broken and he struggled to find the right words; for the whole country it was proof that the time for dreaming was over and that a new, even stricter imprisonment would crush the country.

All those who had taken advantage of the Spring to speak out and express their ideas and criticise what didn't work suddenly fell silent and had no opinions, like in Gottwald's times. The regime's standard language, the tired phrases everyone mocked during the Spring were back in full force. Questions remained unanswered; nobody had an opinion; jurisdiction always lay elsewhere; preset phrases from the past proliferated again. Minds and tongues had iced over like in the toughest years and any hope for the future had disappeared from the horizon of existence.

Jan Zábřana was well acquainted with that atmosphere. But for the books he loved, time was once again running low.

In spring 1968 some passages of *Doctor Zhivago* translated by Zábřana were published in the magazine *My68* and two chapters of the book were edited for *Světova Literatura*, with illustrations by the great artist Mikuláš Medek.

The havoc following the invasion caused all projects to be put on hold. Nobody had any idea how things would develop; it wasn't known whether, once the dust settled, the Czechs would be allowed a degree of autonomy and some of the freedom conquered just a few months earlier.

The invaders felt that the country, being under military control, could not retaliate. The people, however, were restless, so in order to prevent any resounding protests the Soviets slowly restored the situation as it was before Dubček's appointment. For a few months, then, a modicum of autonomy was still possible. Amazingly, in the November-December 1968 edition of *Světova Literatura*, two chapters of *Doctor Zhivago* were published, along with Medek's illustrations.

With what little strength he had left and despite his shattered morale, on December 16th 1968 Jan Zábřana was able to give the publisher his completed translation. He wasn't quite satisfied with his work and would have liked to tweak it here and there to meet his taste as a poet, but he was exhausted and felt oppressed. He realised that time was against him and the book.

For months he felt he was fighting against time, with uncertainty and threats always looming. The way he always saw things coming was uncanny and disturbing.

During the time of general euphoria he had been the only one who couldn't celebrate, almost as if some subtle awareness warned him of the impending threats and the future tragedy.

Now he knew he was right. And he knew he was right about the future, about the broken hope, about the abyss that lay ahead.

Now, even mere survival would be a feat. He silently waited for the cruel mechanism of history to dig in its claws, its iron teeth into the delicate flesh of that unlucky country. New boots worn by new barbaric masters were trampling that civilisation, that beauty, that defenceless wonder.

The months went by and nothing moved. Every act, every decision that seemed to go in the direction of the Spring was suddenly suspended, paralysed and eventually derailed.

Everyone waited silently for the worst; and slowly, bureaucratically, it did. The military vice that took some critical areas on August 20th 1968 was growing, cynically stifling even the palest initiatives.

On May 11th 1970, Jan Zábřana, like many other writers and translators, got a letter from his publisher. It said:

“The Publishing House has changed the political and cultural direction of its publishing activities. All existing contracts have been examined to assess their correspondence with the new endeavours of the Publishing House. Consequently, the decision has been made not to publish your work.”

That pre-printed letter was as good as a gravestone. Years of work and the passion of those who believed in the project had been sacrificed in the name of a publishing policy and of the servants who had established themselves everywhere to take new orders from new masters.

As soon as the Soviets arrived proscription lists of men and books were made: professors, lecturers, teachers, senior officials, politicians, intellectuals would soon end up working as porters, woodsmen, miners, drivers, dustmen. Important published books would be pulped; books that bore witness to the passing of times would be blocked and suppressed. No-one knew in what direction to go; only works not to be published and ideas not to be spread were searched for with any effort.

After years of darkness, luck had given Jan a glimmer of hope and freedom. He had embraced it fully, giving it his all. But now luck was dimming that glimmer forever and right when he was about to complete his work.

It was over. And he knew it.

Jan Zábřana never saw the publication of his translation of *Doctor Zhivago*.

The Soviet grip on Czechoslovakia would resist another twenty years. Jan couldn't resist that long. Overcome by bitterness, pain, the defeat of a whole generation, the eternal triumph of the mediocre and the worst, he died of liver cancer on 3rd September 1984. He just had the time to leave his beloved, dearest and unswerving Marie his poems, translations and, most importantly, the monument of his memories, the secret notebooks of his thirty-year-long diary, where the future generations would recognise the past, the righteous and the traitors, who had served and who had carried their pain with dignity and their dignity without shame.

Jan was gone but not his memory; it was all the more precious, for everything that had been wouldn't be in vain and oblivion would not mix killers and victims, mercenaries and dreamers, informers and losing parties.

Marie embraced the gift and committed herself to pursuing that silent fight Jan had to give up. Those diaries and poems were in good hands; it was just a matter of time now before history remembered that small, precious country invaded not once but twice throughout the 20th century by its two most powerful and brutal neighbours.

History remembered Czechoslovakia.

The unstoppable decline of the invading empire led to the Velvet Revolution in 1989.

Jan Zábřana's times were back.

In 1990, Marie Zábřanová, with the precious help of Jaroslava Dientsbierová, finally managed to publish her husband's translation of *Doctor Zhivago* through the publisher Lidové Nakladatelství. The long journey of that fatal book had come to an end.

Its success was immediate and exceeded expectations. It is estimated that the first edition sold as many as 100000 copies – a rare event for a quality book. A second edition was printed in 2003 and included among the classics of Euromedia Group Odeon; a third edition was printed in 2005 for Lidové Noviny. At last, Czech readers could also read the book that had been condemned and pursued for years by an obtuse power.

In 1992 Jan Zábřana's diary was also published with the title *Celý život (A Whole Life)*: 1100 pages of daily history, the life of Czechoslovakia in the years of the freeze-over. It was yet

another gift from Jan to those who, like him, had never surrendered and to those who, after him, needed to know.

Marie had fulfilled her task.

Jan's memory would survive

Suspicion

The phone rang at about 10 p.m.

It was my first interlocutor, the man for all the seasons.

“Good evening” he said. “How are you?”

“I’m doing pretty well, thank you” I answered. “Your contacts haven’t helped me much.”

“Maybe they couldn’t do anymore. Or maybe it wouldn’t have been fair to put words into other people’s mouths.”

“I see. And I see you haven’t forgotten about me.”

“Of course not. You’re a smart, hard-working person. Have you carried on with your investigation, even without any further information from us?”

“Not yet. I’m trying to make light of certain things. But time flies – everything fades away and disappears in a flash.”

“Dead men tell no tales and the living would rather forget. Fear is stronger than the truth. Haven’t you realised it yet?”

“Sure, fear and ulterior motives are often stronger. But the truth’s strength is oblique and unpredictable. It can come from the last places or people you’d imagine and for mysterious reasons, too. Or perhaps I’m waiting for something of the kind to happen or for overlooked or disappeared proof to reappear. Anything’s possible.”

“I can understand your doggedness. But I doubt certain things can reappear. It wouldn’t benefit anyone. That’s important. You know what? I’ve got an opinion, considering the elements you’ve given me and considering the whole situation. I’m sure that if things really went the way you suspect and someone planned the whole accident, then I find it highly unlikely the local services didn’t know anything about it. It might seem strange, and yet these operations always rely on cover-ups – authorisations, if you will. You see, the person in question was a troublesome intellectual and caused embarrassment to virtually all the political factions. He was a party spoiler, a skilled man who knew how to pull the public opinion’s strings. He irritated a lot of people – even domestically. And when you irritate a lot of people no-one’s going to come to your rescue when you need it. No-one’s going to see if something happens. Maybe that’s how it went – when some outer force came to do its job, it was given the scope it needed. Blind eyes were turned. That’s how things work. You know but you don’t act because it’s to everyone’s benefit.

Are you aware of any proper, thorough investigations into the crash? Or was the superficial evidence deemed enough to close the case? Car crashes work well in situations like this. Remember what happened in Bulgaria in 1973? The secret services tried to kill PCI secretary Berlinguer with the most typical road accident – a lorry spins out of control and crashes into the car with the target. Sure, things were different there and the ones pulling the strings had full control over the area. Everyone on the Italian delegation realised it was intentional, and yet the lorry driver vanished right away and no investigation was carried out. The same happened with Camus – no-one really wanted to find out what happened. I’m not pointing any fingers but there are parallels that make me smell a rat. The absurd fate, the car crash, the seemingly inexplicable causes on a straight road in full daylight and no proper investigation...

You’ll realise it too if you try to spread this story. You’ll run into a lot of trouble, first of all because you’re a foreigner – certain topics are internal affairs exclusively. And then bringing up

facts that have been officially ascertained is bound to ruffle some feathers. It's better to make do with the convenient official version that has been corroborated by time, by custom, by suitability. You won't have it easy, I can assure you. But I don't want to burst your bubble. After all, something always does reappear. Sometimes bodies rise to the surface; the net of reality loosens up; the past re-emerges in places and at times that nobody would expect. So don't worry – maybe you're right and something *will* pop up to validate your theory. Just try not to bother the people who could harm you. As you know, life is full of little, unexpected and potentially fatal accidents. And sometimes they seem to happen to the right people – ever wonder why? You know it all too well. So don't take too much advantage of your independence.

If you find something, I'd appreciate it if you'd let me know. Good-bye for now and don't worry about the past – it's the present we've got to look out for."

The truth about the Nagy affair

On June 16th 1958 Hungarian prime minister Imre Nagy, who had long opposed the Soviets in his struggle for Hungarian independence, was hanged with General Pál Maléter and journalist Miklós Gimes after a mockery of a trial directed and decided by Moscow.

Powerless indignation swept over the world. In France, a group of editors studied the facts, papers and evidence to prove that Imre Nagy had been “legally” killed.

A book called *The truth about the Nagy affair* was released in the hope of restoring the truth. Albert Camus wrote a memorable foreword to the book, sparing no venom for the killers and invaders of Hungary.

The foreword was also published in issue 20 of the libertarian magazine *Témoins*. Here are Camus’ bluntly scathing words, which must have irritated the Soviets:

“‘A fair and necessary act’”: this is how Gomułka, last May, described the intervention of Soviet troops in Hungary.

God, or rather History, might forgive the Polish leader for his use of the word ‘necessary’, given the historical necessity his country is going through.

After all, the dialectics of the Red Army have him firmly in their grasp.

But the word ‘fair’ wasn’t necessary.

To a mere assessment he added a personal, positive opinion thus showing a complicity which could spread like wildfire.

Indeed, one month later, leveraging their positive reference, the Russian masters fairly hanged Hungary’s only legal leader along with three of his friends. And of all the flow of words a Marxist politician like Gomułka has had to issue, his one completely unacceptable word may end up being the only one to survive – much to the misfortune of his memory.

To fix things, this book proves that Hungary and Imre Nagy were plagued by perjury, betrayal, defiance of international law, violation of diplomatic and parliamentary immunity, kidnapping and murder.

Only robbery didn’t make the list. I must say I’m sorry.

Amidst all these wonderful people a thief would seem bucolic and redeeming.

But no!

We’re among austere people who don’t kill on a whim or for fun but only because it’s necessary, in historical terms of course, to give Tito food for thought (and, for instance, to get the Yugoslavian diplomats tasked with watching over Nagy’s exit from the embassy chased off the bus), or to do Mao a favour (you know, sweet Mao, the hundred-flower poet, the Chinese daisy! By the way, you can bet he asked to have his hanged men decked with flowers – he wanted them and he got them!).

So out of necessity Nagy and the others were judged, secretly and hurriedly, perhaps in Russia or maybe in Hungary or Beijing. Who knows? It doesn’t matter – we’re internationalists, after all. It happened quickly because progress can’t be stopped and so, without wasting time, they got the noose.

They were laid down in the direction of history and their headstones were carved.

Specifically, five nice volumes to ornate these miserable tombs and give the thing historical meaning.

Obviously this treatise of innocence is called The White Book, like the wolf.

In short, it's a prosecutor's closing speech.

And out of mere convenience it gets read after the execution.

In the historical universe there is a sense of scale.

The advantage is that the prosecutor plays as a winner.

Even before he starts, he's already been told he's right and the accused has had his neck broken.

In any case, given the circumstances, i.e. the accused couldn't defend themselves (they had the right to freely choose their lawyers but only from a list of good subjects chosen by the ministry of justice) and since the executioner was summoned before the accusation papers were published, we have to give up and simply publish them here in defence of the accused after their execution.

What's the point, someone might ask? Indeed – what's the point?

History is clear: there's no mistaking it. Nagy was killed, not tried and judged.

Everyone knows it – even the judges. All that's left to do is file away the issue.

After all it doesn't affect the balance of power or the positions.

For instance, in October 1956 the world cried out in indignation.

Then the world calmed down visibly.

In October 1956 the UN became indignant. It even issued some very harsh orders to the Kádár government.

That same government flung the orders back in the sender's face.

Great, said the UN.

And then the representative of the Kádár government took his seat in New York, where he regularly stands up for the oppressed people in the West.

There's more. In October 1956, in Paris, men who had always looked at the Soviet Union through the same eyes you'd look a dear, lively child through, protested against the Mongolians in Budapest.

I was still naïve at 43 and felt warmth and gratitude given the effort they had made to find the truth.

Well, three months later in Paris we elected a deputy out of sheer habit, and they gave up for a communist who, obviously, had applauded the annihilation of the Hungarian uprising.

It pained them to give up: "You were nasty to Hungary" they said, "You were rude. And so it is with great sadness that we vote for you at the second round." Then the sadness dwindled but after all there's always unity in bad actions.

So frankly, if the world, if the UN, if our intelligence, who don't have Gomułka's excuses, managed to come to terms so easily with the Budapest killings, then why should the others, the historicists, worry about Nagy or the future?

Basically, what the UN said is that the law is imperative only for those that respect it.

For everyone else it's optional.

We're fine with that, said the historicists, quite rightly we're not respecting it.

Right, concluded Gomułka.

They always green-lighted him.

And they were quick to set off again with a police van, obviously.

Since then, what's been the point of proving evidence?

The ones that weren't ultimately enlightened by the October facts won't be enlightened by anything if not, maybe one day, by the martyrdom of their own country.

They can read and that's enough to see that the public prosecutor's closing speech in Budapest can't hold water.

It's painful, in the following pages, to see the long effort of the editors to disprove obvious vices.

When we read that Nagy was accused of “abusing his legal options” we are told that Jarry would be better off talking about this sordid and ferocious story.

So indignation is dangerously fought by disgust – so much disgust to spit on these repugnant comedies, on these mediocre individuals that force you to take them seriously through murder, on this massive lie that we ourselves validate by discussing it and fighting it, on this monstrous system that has ended up ridiculing socialism and dishonouring humanism, that is pushing us away forever, like from a dish whose sauce really tastes too much like blood.

Really, what’s the point?

Everyone – especially Kádár, who was his minister and swore he’d be spared – knows Nagy was innocent.

The very authors of the White Book know their defence is idiotic and that the accused were murdered for Yugoslavian or Chinese reasons, in any case because of dialectics, since dialectics create knots. If these lucid individuals published their big novel it wasn’t out of vanity but only for their own ulterior motives and because one can’t appear in society, were it even internationally, with a very naïve “Murderer” on one’s business card.

In other words, the White Book is a sort of clumsy courtesy that can’t fool anyone.

What’s the point of trusting it and why make the massive effort of disproving it before a world concerned only with making it to the moon or getting royalty to marry?

Well, first of all because maybe these people can’t be allowed to lie for years.

Nobody believes them, of course.

But man is a delicate creature who is quick to tire out.

In a moment of laziness or weakness, a lonely man somewhere in the world might say: why not?

And that day the hanged would be killed a second time.

And bit by bit, out of sheer effort and oblivion, the generalised lie would become truth, we would believe that freedom can only grow in the shadow of the gallows, that there’s no equality other than obsequious equality, and that we have to leave it up to attorneys to define what good socialism is.

That was why, given the Budapest closing speech, the exact truth had to be reconstructed, no matter how much time and effort it took.

This book, then, rectifies all the sentences in the accusation with the necessary objectiveness and clarity of thought.

It will stop the contagion of lies here and now.

And we have to admit that the argument “Frankly, why should they get mad?” is a double-edged sword. If the cowardice or complacency of the world have led the killers to believe their hands are free then we must go out of our way so that next time they feel a little more concerned.

There are still men in the Hungarian prisons expecting the worst and we have to do what we can to save them from their killers.

Let us never ever, not even for an instant, believe that the hanging of Nagy and his friends was fair.

It was a revolting crime and even the most forgetful of us must remember it.

Let us use the disgust that fills us to fuel our stubbornness.

The Hungarian tragedy left us feeling powerless; we still feel powerless. But it’s not total powerlessness.

The refusal of the fact, the alertness of heart and spirit, the decision to deny lies their right to any citizenship, the will not to abandon innocence even after it has been strangled, are the rules of a possible action.

Not enough, sure, but necessary – a necessity juxtaposed to the other, ignoble one, that is historical necessity; a necessity that will always keep up with it and sometimes will neutralise it, destroy it in the long run and then let the true history of men advance ever so slightly.

This book, which loyally offers defence to the innocent who have long since been killed, responds to this ever-living necessity.

A pacific libertarian

There's an excerpt from the first act of *The Just Assassins* that sheds light on Camus' thought. The main character cries: "I love beauty, happiness! That's why I hate tyranny. How can I explain it to them? The revolution, of course! But a revolution for life, to give people a chance at life, understand?"

Camus was variously labelled, and in one of his latest books Michel Onfray has carefully examined his thought and work. In 1951, when *The Rebel* was published, Camus' works were slammed by Jean-Paul Sartre and by his fellow, largely Stalinist *intelligentsia*.

Time would redeem Camus' memory as well as, like Onfray pointed out, his unquestionable honesty, sagacity and valour. On the other hand, Sartre's cynicism, baseness and lust for personal gain masked as cultural interest have long been dismissed as disappointing.

It is crystal-clear, though, that the public opinion on Camus has long suffered from Sartre's anathema, and from his proselytes' and followers' constant efforts to besmirch Camus' work and person.

In his 1953 *Notebooks* he wrote: "I am only asking for one thing – and I am asking humbly, even though I am aware it is an enormous request: I ask to be carefully read".

It was a careless – or, rather, partial – reading of Camus' work and engagement that earned him a reputation as a lame Social Democrat: his fault was his unwillingness to be as extreme and maximalist upon certain matters, as it would please the wannabe revolutionaries of Saint-Germain and the media, forever hungry for bombastic stances.

In fact, Camus was always much closer to the libertarian and anarchist press, of which he was an assiduous collaborator. It was his true milieu of choice: he wrote for *La Révolution prolétarienne* and for *Témoins*.

La Révolution prolétarienne fell in line with revolutionary unionism; its manifesto, almost quoting the First International, read: "The emancipation of the working class shall be pursued by no-one but the working class".

In his youth Camus was a member of the Communist party: he had joined it in Algeria, in autumn 1935, but in 1937 he was expelled because of his independent mindset and his ideas, which were regarded as Muslim-nationalist – and were thus incompatible with the Party's new line.

The Algerian communist party was then under the authority of the French one. When the French Popular Front collapsed, the guidelines coming from Moscow caused the PCF to abruptly change its course of action: in order not to deplete France, the party toned down its anti-colonialist and antimilitarist orientation.

The same abrupt change of stance was forced upon the PCA, and it was a source of major turmoil amidst its militants. It also resulted in the detachment of the Étoile Nord-Africaine (ENA) – the Muslim Front of the Communist party. This break-off generated an extremely thorny environment and ultimately led former brothers-in-arms to fight each other.

In fact, just like many other left-wing youths of his day, Camus had joined the party mostly to stand up to the Fascist threat. Nonetheless, he wasn't a Marxist and wasn't very knowledgeable about Marx's works.

His intellectual freedom, his understanding of the Muslims' claims, his honesty and his loyalty to the old ENA fellows – in striking contrast to the PCA's two-facedness – cost him his membership.

We might call Camus a pacific libertarian, an enlightened anarchist. He was certainly close to some practical, libertarian socialism that strove to help the working class. He was some sort of revolutionary unionist – a bit like Pelloutier, who in 1895 was already preaching about the affinity between unionism and anarchism.

Camus' worldview, Onfray said, was rooted in the best vital drives, in a sane idea of society, in unselfish individualism, in the Mediterranean light. He couldn't be any further from the Russian bolshevists and nihilists, from the Slavic terrorists, from Hegel-inspired ideas, and from any delusional totalitarian grandeur.

According to Onfray, in Camus' perspective Tipasa was opposite to Berlin, Plotinus to Sade, Proudhon to Marx, Pelloutier to Lenin, and the Paris Commune to the Siberian Gulag.

He saw anarchism as some ethical thirst for real, practical social justice; a man-sized, positive anarchy.

His soul was noble and his gaze upon reality was just, and thus he would never allow for any bloody, barbaric mean to justify humane ends. His revolt was a revolt for life; his untamed gaze was like La Boétie's, who wrote: "Be determined to never serve again, and you will find that you are free".

Let us remember that the notion of the "revolt" in Camus' work is twofold. It is a metaphysical revolt against the human condition, tortured by evil and pain (and this accounts for his statement that "Children will die unfairly even in the best of societies"); but it is also a political revolt against God and men. It is a relentless, unending, necessary revolt: "It is essential to die unreconciled and not of one's own free will."

According to Onfray's studies, which were partly based on Marin Progreso's 1967 book *La pensée politique d'Albert Camus*, it seems that in the early Fifties Camus approved of the manifesto of libertarian socialism written by Gaston Leval (with whom he had a minor quarrel, promptly settled, when *The Rebel* was published).

As a matter of fact, Leval's pamphlet was found amidst Camus' papers, and it seems, in spirit, in agreement with Albert Camus' well-known perspective. It encouraged one to cherish a libertarian ethic and, quite unlike what the Marxists preached, it didn't extol the supremacy of economy and the creation of a new man through changed means of production. On the contrary, it was a new man that was bound to change them. Revolution must be moral rather than economic, and a renewed mankind with new values would learn how to evenly distribute wealth.

Those who intend to create a new society must be morally superior to those they want to defeat: on this point in particular we can feel Camus' spiritual approval.

In a world which is unprincipled we can only appeal to such values as justice, brotherhood, honesty, loyalty, righteousness, dignity, sympathy and selflessness.

With its extreme materialism and distrust of the human conscience, Marxism would damage Socialism forever.

We can hear the echo of the ancient moral needs that have always been the banner in Camus' fight for a just society and for ethical, rather than economic, human growth.

Onfray pointed out the affinity between Camus and Gramsci, who thought that every social revolution first and foremost should ask for a revolution in consciences. Ideas and knowledge must pave the way for social revolution, which can take place only after a dramatic cultural change has occurred.

It is also worth underlining the proximity of Camus' thought with Simone Weil's. Camus thought very highly of her: as the editor of Gallimard he edited seven works of Weil's (including *The Need for Roots*, *La condition ouvrière*, *Oppression and Liberty* and *Écrits de*

Londres). He also edited her *Écrits historiques et politiques*, which were to be published by Gallimard in 1960, after Camus' death.

Roger Quillot wrote that "Camus was fond of Simone Weil, and her work undoubtedly drew him closer to revolutionary unionism. It was a political environment very familiar to her, and in it Camus recognized her own fiery intransigence".

Lou Marin made it possible to shed light upon this libertarian Camus. He pointed out that Camus owed much to Simone Weil, and that he deeply admired her because she had willingly sacrificed her whole private life for the sake of the libertarian movement.

In a 1951 letter addressed to Weil's mother, Camus wrote: "Simone Weil, I know, is the only great soul of our time. I hope that those who acknowledge it will draw enough humbleness from it not to be tempted to seize upon this tremendous account. As for me, I would be content if I knew that, even in my position and with the measly means at my disposal, I managed to spread her work, whose value and force has yet to be appreciated".

Camus wrote that Weil never strove for anything personal. Her loneliness, he wrote, was "a precursor's loneliness, brimming with hope"; and he said that "[he couldn't bring himself] to picture a European renewal that turned a blind eye on the needs Simone Weil pointed out in *The Need for Roots*".

They were both tormented by the very same thirst for justice and truth – a thirst that would not be quenched by personal profit.

"When a society is inevitably headed towards falsehood, a proud heart's only comfort lies in shunning the privileges it offers", Camus wrote about Simone Weil.

Marin also pointed out how Camus was influenced by his close acquaintance with the French anarchist Rirette Maîtrejean. They had met in Paris and, in 1940, they fled from the German invasion in the same car. In Clermont-Ferrand they would meet up almost daily for three months; later that year, in Lyon, they would see each other less frequently. Maîtrejean would later say: "We were always together".

It was she who introduced Camus to the long-fought cause to free Victor Serge from the Soviet prisons; and it was she who told him all about the gory trials in the days of Stalin.

There was a remarkable generational gap between the two of them – Maîtrejean was 53, Camus was 27 – and it's hard to tell whether it was she who lured Camus into the anarchist cause, and how. What is beyond doubt, though, is that this charismatic woman helped young Albert to develop a libertarian perspective.

Camus would untiringly object to injustice and oppression; he sided against the Spanish Fascist dictatorship and the Soviet invasion of Hungary; he was a devoted philanthropist, and all this gave him a certain quixotic aura. It is no wonder that Cervantes' chivalrous, nostalgic knight was one of Camus' role models: on October 23rd 1955, at the Sorbonne, he delivered a celebratory speech for the 350th anniversary of the publishing of *Don Quixote*. The speech was published the following 12th November on *Le Monde Libératarie* under the title "Spain and quixotry".

Honour, freedom, the defence of the weak, abused or persecuted; a mixture of generosity and a rebellion against all injustices: these qualities made Don Quixote the perfect comrade for Camus. After all, they both were tireless warriors, fighting against all odds; and never giving up, in the teeth of the inequity – either social or metaphysical – that haunts our world.

Mardi 5 Janvier 1960
No 4422

ALBERT CAMUS EST MORT

ALBERT CAMUS a trouvé la mort hier dans un accident de voiture sur la route nationale 5, près de Villavieja, vers 16 h 30.

Le corps a été découvert à 100 km de Paris, dans une zone désertique, isolée, à l'extrémité d'une route qui ne compte que quelques véhicules.



ALBERT CAMUS

Une conscience contre le chaos

ALBERT CAMUS avait conscience de son rôle, de son destin, de son rôle de la passion, de son rôle de la conscience, de son rôle de la vérité dans un monde où l'homme est l'homme qui se bat.

Comprendre son époque

Il se battait pour une vérité, pour une vérité qui était la vérité de son époque, la vérité de son temps, la vérité de son monde.

L'étranger

Il a eu des idées nouvelles, des idées nouvelles qui ont marqué son époque, qui ont marqué son monde, qui ont marqué son destin.

Prix Nobel

Il a reçu le prix Nobel de littérature en 1954, pour son œuvre, pour son œuvre qui était la vérité de son époque, la vérité de son temps, la vérité de son monde.

Directeur de «Combat»

Il a été directeur de «Combat», le journal de la Résistance, le journal de la liberté, le journal de la vérité, le journal de son époque, le journal de son monde, le journal de son destin.

LE MEILLEUR DES NOTRES

Il est le meilleur des nôtres, le meilleur des nôtres qui a marqué son époque, qui a marqué son monde, qui a marqué son destin.

combat

Le journal de la Résistance, le journal de la liberté, le journal de la vérité, le journal de son époque, le journal de son monde, le journal de son destin.

LA RÉSISTANCE ?

La Résistance, la Résistance qui a marqué son époque, qui a marqué son monde, qui a marqué son destin.

LA PRESSE DE TRANSITION

La Presse de Transition, la Presse de Transition qui a marqué son époque, qui a marqué son monde, qui a marqué son destin.



Albert Camus et ses amis

Il est le meilleur des nôtres, le meilleur des nôtres qui a marqué son époque, qui a marqué son monde, qui a marqué son destin.

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Front page of Combat magazine (January 5 1960): the death of Albert Camus hits the news.

A Valediction Albert Camus has died

The years don't seem to weigh on Camus' memory. His voice is still loud and resonant; his words are immortal, just like the values he fought – and, perhaps, died – for.

And yet, how many times have we been in need for his words – how many times has not only France but the whole world missed his valued, irreplaceable voice over the last decades.

Things would have gone very differently if Camus had been there in 1968. Both the rebelling youth and the powers that be would have been forced to deal with his firm words, his stern glance.

How different would Mitterand's left-wing victory have been in 1981; how towering a conscience would have been there to guide him through his term; how adamant a judgement would have shunned all easy compromise, all supine lenience.

A silent era went by in want of Camus' voice. Italy experienced a similar void when Pasolini died, leaving his country to be preyed upon by political patronage – a victim to defective sovereignty, mammon, and media control.

The empire of the media has grown enormously since Camus' death – an unsettling growth that would just get worse with the internet. People have been overwhelmed by a flood of information, with no guarantee of its quality or reliability.

In this downpour of unverified news, who are we supposed to trust? Who should we turn to with our doubts and questions?

Ideologies are on the wane; faith gives no solid answers about the nature of Evil, whose power expands beyond our life-spans and beyond History itself. All intellectuals are concerned about today is how many copies of their books they sell; the only whistle-blowing they ever do is to call for help if a fire breaks out.

But men like Camus and Pasolini were of a better kind; they were far-sighted and morally superior, and therefore could pass judgement on their times. They were allowed to suggest a course of action, to stand up for principles, to remind us what the essential pillars of society are. It was upon them to be the fearless discoverers of the secret abuses of power and to give voice to the weak, the exploited, the defeated.

When they passed we all became a bit more lonely, and the powers that be got back their unbounded dominance and undisturbed authority.

If they were here to fight with us in the name of knowledge and reason, perhaps today the intellectuals wouldn't be in such a sorry state, and their influence upon society and public opinion wouldn't be as measly as it is.

There are still imperialistic wars raging on in the world. They are sparked off by convenience rather than by the general will, and they wear the mask of the noblest values and the cloth of the most sacred humane causes. Thinkers justify wars, and oil and building companies and weapon lobbies sponsor them.

Reality is increasingly cold and indifferent, power and profit being the only banners to fight for, bare and stripped of their original *raison d'être*.

Albert Camus taught us how to stand our ground.

He looked Medusa – the 20th-century arch-enemy, Nazism – right in the eye, and Nazism was defeated.

Today's enemies are more cynical and more subtle than then, but Camus' words can still guide us through the darkness. They can still shoulder us and keep us from losing our common sense and our freedom.

Our lives are plunged into a lake of absurdity which is not different from Sisyphus'.

But there's an "evidence [that] lures the individual from his solitude [...] I rebel – therefore we exist."

"The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy."

There's still hope. Before the waves of time come to lay waste to the sandy, frail traces of what happened from March 15th 1957 (the day of Camus' fatal speech at the Salle Wagram) to the car crash on January 4th 1960, we can still hope that some proof arises – an evidence, a voice finally telling us what happened in those dark, mysterious last days.

Who knows – maybe this very book will be the spark that lights up the hearth of truth.

We owe it to Albert Camus and to his memory.

Pravda vítězí (Truth prevails).

The revelations of Jacques Vergès and other insightful accounts

The book you have just finished reading was presented with journalist Antonella Flori at the bookshop “Centofiori” in Milan on May 14th 2014. Sitting among the audience was a figure of prominence: the outstanding Italian barrister and one of the leading men in the *Mani Pulite* corruption trial, Giuliano Spazzali. After the presentation, Spazzali asked to share the remarkable story of his own acquaintance with the renowned French lawyer Jacques Vergès, a relevant character of 20th-century France. A committed communist right from the outset, Vergès always stood out in French courthouses ever since his defence of a group of women attackers during the Algerian liberation war. It was Vergès who saved from nearly certain capital punishment Djamila Bouhired, a resistance fighter who would eventually become his wife. To save her, he pointed a finger at the whole repressive system of the French army, deployed in Algeria in a desperate attempt to crush its quest for independence. The actions of Vergès, however, nearly cost him his own life: he was in the sights of La Main Rouge – the French intelligence organisation whose goal was to strike the lawyers working for the National Liberation Front living in Paris. It was La Main Rouge that executed by shotgun Amokrane Ould Aoudia on May 21st 1959. Vergès was next on La Main Rouge’s death list, and he was spared his life only thanks to the mediation of General Paul Grossin, the head of the SDECE (External Documentation and Counter-Espionage Service).

In the late ‘60s Spazzali went to France to deal with several trials concerning Italian political fugitives. On this occasion he made friends with Vergès – a friendship born out of personal and professional closeness.

Their acquaintance lasted for years and Spazzali had the chance to listen to Vergès’ own account of Camus’ death.

Vergès was absolutely confident in what he said and stressed how the version of events he was giving, rather than merely a partial opinion, was the outcome of hard facts he knew of. He said that Camus’ fatal accident had been painstakingly staged by a KGB section and tamely acquiesced to by the French intelligence. Spazzali sent me a handwritten account to corroborate his story:

“This is what I remember of the story Vergès told me. I met him – a well-famed lawyer, renowned for his revolutionary defence of the N. L. F. activists back in the days of the Algerian war – when he had just taken up practicing law again in Paris, having just come out of a long ‘retirement’. I met him several times in the late Sixties, and every time it was a remarkable meeting. Vergès and I would often meet for reasons not related to work. At the time France was brimming with Italian political ‘fugitives’ – either sentenced or waiting for a verdict – so we had many requests for extradition to deal with. However, we would often wander away from business – a rather natural tendency for those who happen to have other interests than criminal law. It was during one of these digressions with my distinguished friend that he hinted at – or rather, firmly stated – his own idea about the circumstances of Camus’ death. Vergès was convinced that the writer didn’t die in a common car accident; in fact, he said that the accident had been staged.

It is my opinion that Vergès had more evidence than he cared to share with me; I, on the other hand, refrained from asking. Discretion is the best attitude when a hot topic rises unexpectedly. I didn't investigate any further, and yet I remember how Vergès was certain that the staged accident was schemed by a KGB section with the endorsement of the French intelligence.

Vergès was close to the most secret business of the powers that be. He was especially close to the communists, who had been supporting the NKVD's and the GPU's moves in France. The Soviets' moves included countless abductions and executions of both opponents and fugitives.

His account is extremely important and it is in agreement with the statements of many contemporaries of Camus'. Several witnesses remember how, after having published *The Rebel* (*L'Homme révolté*, 1951) and after his falling-out with Sartre, Camus had been constantly attacked by the communist party and by part of the French left wing, who labelled him as a "fascist" and publicly boycotted him. This attitude showed through in a letter written by Louis Aragon, as well as in the press affiliated to the PCF.

The Soviets loathed Camus and he was publicly frowned on by the PCF, which at the time actively cooperated with the KGB, especially in regards to undercover actions. In the post-war years, particularly from the late Fifties, France had been closely scrutinised by the Soviet intelligence, whose aim was to take advantage of the French-Russian bond that came into existence after WW2. This led to a growing influence of the USSR over France's politics, as well as to major espionage into the highest ranks of power. The final result of this trend was the definitive break-off of France from the United States and from the rest of Europe – a break-off which would eventually translate into De Gaulle's decision to leave NATO in 1966. In hindsight, these events can be regarded as a massive investment on France – a fruitful investment, which fed upon France's innate wariness of the United States, regarded as historical and cultural reckless colonizers. It was an impressive political operation and it left behind a huge trail of written evidence, not limited to historical books but also in the newspapers, which over the years gave accounts of the scandals and undercover activities brought into France by the Soviet intelligence.

Albert Camus was killed for a very precise reason: he interfered with the coalition between the USSR and France. He was a strenuous opponent of the Soviet invasion of Hungary, and he was a person of international prominence: by overtly disassociating himself from Sartre and from the French communist party, Camus ended up being an obstacle to the – not necessarily transparent – political processes of cooperation between Paris and Moscow. Camus' prominent character, with his well-known anti-Soviet attitude, stood out in the eyes of the French people as a reminder of the USSR's cruel imperialism. Both the French and the Soviet government would have benefited greatly from silencing this unpleasant reminder. Perhaps reason of state turned a blind eye on the conspiracy of silence: a long-arranged plan was carried out at last, and Camus was killed. His car crash was regarded as a mere accident and no proper investigation was carried out. After his death, he was put on an idealised pedestal from where he could do no harm. There, amidst France's wisest sages, his sharp critical judgment was ineffective. Sartre and the PCF hastened Camus' *damnatio memoriae*. The Soviet spies, infiltrated at every level of the French hierarchy, were at last free to pursue their intention and reach their goals.

Right after the end of the Russian revolution Paris became the destination of a flood of Soviet emigrants, and the beating heart of massive espionage. The agents from Moscow would abduct and kill the exiled members of the White Movement. Such actions were not only assisted, but actually backed by the French Communist Party. There is copious evidence for many infamous cases of the PCF cooperating with the NKVD and the KGB. Starting from 1929 and following Paul Muraille's lead, the intelligence started employing the so-called "People's correspondents" (or *Rabkors*, for *Rabochy korrespondent*), who were officially supposed to report the social conflicts raging on within the factories to the newspaper *L'Humanité*. In fact, the People's correspondents were carrying information that would eventually reach the Soviet army. Amongst them there were Claude Liogier, Izaiah Bir and Jacques Duclos, who would later become the party's number two. He was working for the Komintern and one of its most important bases was the celebrated Hôtel D'Alsace, where Oscar Wilde died in 1900. In 1932 the underground network's actions hit a roadblock following several arrests, and it was only after World War 2 that the PCF would resume its part in critical espionage cases. While military and industrial espionage were its core activities, several NKVD operations aiming to exterminate Stalin's opponents were also carried out: the abduction of the White Guard General Miller; the killing of the banker Dmitry Navashin; the suspected murder of Lev Trotsky's son in 1937; and that of the rebel agent Ignatz Reiss in Lausanne, Switzerland. During the Second World War efforts had been made to get a few Soviet spies into General De Gaulle's entourage. They would find themselves in an extremely privileged position after the war, and this is where a prominent character in many a shady post-war circumstances stepped in; a man who later, in 1944, and appointed by De Gaulle himself, would even become the Minister of the Interior in the French interim government: Emmanuel d'Astier de la Vigerie. Around the same time another French secret agent who would only be unmasked in 1963 was recruited: George Paques. In the early post-war the French intelligence, which had its name changed from DGER to SDECE in December 1945, was in a sorry state. Colonel Passy, the head of the Gaullist espionage network in London since April 1945, fired most of the staff, which was already infected with too many opponent agents and PCF militants. This renovation, passionately deprecated by the PCF even on the pages of *L'Humanité*, weakened and crippled the organisation, making it even more vulnerable to the infiltration of undercover KGB and GRU agents. One example accounts for all – that of Sandor Rado, a Soviet agent operative in Geneva during the war, who got into France in the summer of 1944 thanks to fake IDs. A KGB agent who crossed over westward during the '60s claimed that there was a Soviet agent who set up home in south-eastern France when the war ended. The local PCF helped him get new fake IDs, and he settled down so well that he even became the mayor of the town he lived in.

When the Allies freed Paris, the PCF could rely on a striking quantitative edge in terms of policemen: in 1945, 3,000 out of 22,000 Parisian agents were also members of the PCF. It was thus the best of times for the communist party to employ their police force to produce all the fake IDs it could. The post-war years were also a convenient time for people connected to the USSR to sneak into France's public and manufacturing sectors. Pierre Guay and Alexander Volodin – two infamous French collaborationists during the Nazi occupation – had their shady past wiped clean by the PCF in return for their loyalty to the party. They were provided with fake dossiers that erased any trace of their responsibilities during the war; moreover, a DGER official and PCF member helped them through the whole process and even got Volodin into the intelligence. Both Volodin and Guay were granted a shining career at the top of the Gaullist power establishment. They spent years close to the Soviet agents in France and played key

roles in several ministries. Although they had been spotted as former collaborationists, they were virtually untouchable (the accusations against them were statute-barred) and, surprisingly enough, they were never condemned for their crimes.

In the spring of 1962 General De Gaulle received a confidential letter from US president Kennedy. It was delivered by a special emissary, who handed it to De Gaulle in person. It was a warning: an informer had sold down the river. Kennedy was warning De Gaulle about the Soviet infiltration into French intelligence – what was worse, even in De Gaulle’s very office. There was no safe means of communication anymore. The first thing De Gaulle did was to secretly send General De Rougemont to Washington, so that he could force out a first-hand confession from the informer. The interrogation lasted for three days, at the end of which De Rougemont had no doubts: the threat was real, and it was everywhere. The mole who was coming clean with the Americans was Anatoliy Golitsyn; formerly a commander of the KGB, he had crossed over westwards in December 1961 while he was in Helsinki. He was now providing the USA with massive amounts of precious information. It looked like manna from the heavens for the USA, but something stood in their way: Golitsyn didn’t know the names of the infiltrates he was ratting out. He could only inform on what they did and where they did it. Nonetheless, his reports led to the arrest of several Soviet moles: one of them was Georges Paques, who was working for NATO and was caught red-handed and arrested in August 1963 for revealing classified information to the enemy. With Paques, however – as well as with several disloyal agents – the French government was curiously lenient. The first verdict Paques was given in 1964 was life imprisonment for high treason; the sentence, though, was commuted into twenty years of imprisonment, and in the end he was pardoned by President Pompidou in 1970. One of Michel Debré’s technical counsellors in the early ‘60s, Constantin Melnik, confirmed that the Gaullist party was swarming with KGB agents that were never caught. According to Golitsyn, nested in the bosom of the SDECE there was a KGB network that went by the name of “Saphir”, in which a dozen agents operated. Golitsyn also knew about the renovation the SDECE had gone through, and he could also recall the names of several agents. Now that such a large network of moles had come to light, it was easier to understand why so many secret operations had fallen through over the previous years. The most infamous, as well as the most important one, had been the so-called “Minos operation”, financed by the CIA and backed by the SDECE. The French army had trained up several anti-communist fugitives from Czechoslovakia, then airdropped them into Slovakia hoping to muster up an armed resistance movement. But the Czechoslovakian intelligence had been warned about the plan: a platoon was waiting for the disloyal paratroopers, who were probably executed for high treason. After the failure of the Minos operation, the CIA changed their mind about the French intelligence and started looking at it with wary eyes.

Golitsyn also reported that a former minister very close to De Gaulle, as well as several other French statesmen, were on the Soviet payroll. The person Golitsyn was referring to had been amidst De Gaulle’s *coterie* in the days of the war and had even been a minister of the general’s interim government. There were a few possible names, and among them there was Louis Joxe’s, though no evidence was ever found against him. Joxe had been a secretary in the interim government from 1945 to 1946, and an ambassador in Moscow from 1952 to 1953. Another highly suspected person – and quite unsettlingly, for his personal details matched Golitsyn’s indications – was no less than Emmanuel d’Astier de la Vigerie, the Minister of the Interior in De Gaulle’s interim government in 1944. D’Astier de la Vigerie had also been the editor of *Libération*, the newspaper financed by the PCF, right until its closedown in 1964 (the newspaper held no relation whatsoever with the modern *Libération*). Even though he had been on the hard right before the war, during the Resistance he jumped on the PCF’s bandwagon. It was thanks to the communists’ votes that he later obtained his parliamentary

seat. By suggestion of Louis Aragon, he was awarded the Lenin Prize in 1957 for his “efforts in maintaining the peace”. He was a frequent visitor to the USSR and got married to a Russian woman, the daughter of the former ambassador Leonid Krasin. According to General Krivitsky – one of the most important Soviet agents, who fled to the Western countries and was killed in a Washington hotel in 1940 – the PCF’s shadow party Union Progressiste was actually founded by d’Astier de la Vigerie and Pierre Cot, another man close to Moscow. D’Astier de la Vigerie reached the pinnacles of the World Peace Council, which had been established by the Kominform, and was a regular at the Russian embassy. Writing down the memoirs of his seven-year-long term, president Vincent Auriol noted: “There is almost no-one I loathe as much as d’Astier de la Vigerie. He is nothing but a mere pawn in the PCF’s hands. He is always satisfied and he would allow everything. There must be a skeleton in his cupboard. What was his crime, that he feels he is bound to pay off like this?” d’Astier had written several racist and anti-Semitic pamphlets in the Thirties; then, during the war, he suddenly aligned with De Gaulle and then with the communist party. He would talk of himself as a “very left-wing Gaullist”, and both De Gaulle and the Soviets held him in high regard. In 1948 he took issues with Camus on *Libération*, bashing him for his pacifism. “You are a pacifist, and yet your social movement for peace is like an anti-tuberculosis movement that aims at holding back the sick rather than preventing contagion”. According to Olivier Todd, Camus regarded d’Astier as a double-crosser and an unprincipled Stalinist. To Jean Daniel he wrote: “Aragon Casanova and Kanapa enjoy their rule of terror over us modest French writers, while d’Astier de la Vigerie fools himself into thinking that *I* am the threat, and he thinks that I can forget about all the victims he never dreamt of caring about”. Their dispute continued on the pages of *L’action* and of the bimonthly newspaper *La gauche*, and at its core there was the debate about Marxism and how to overcome capitalism. Camus’ stance was adamant: “We will never approve of concentration camps”.

Such words were slaps in the face of those who sought to present the French people with a perfect picture of the Stalinist society. Their real target – their enemy no. 1 – was now Camus.

The memoirs of Oleg Kalugin – a KGB general who fled westward after 30 years of service for the USSR –, published in the US in 1994, abound with unsettling statements concerning the French intelligence. It was allegedly more packed with infiltrators than any other Western country. Kalugin wrote that “in 1973, before I joined the counter-intelligence, I already knew that there were numerous infiltrators of ours in France. Even so, the number of high-rank moles on our payroll amidst the French army, intelligence and counter-intelligence amazed me. Back then there were a dozen excellent agents working for us in France, and each was a leader of their sector. We had our hands all over the French intelligence, which all the more appeared to us terribly leaky and flawed.” So much infiltration could do more than strike a shared goal like Camus’ assassination: it could also work as an independent service, unnoticed by the uncorrupted part of the intelligence. Jacques Vergès’ hints at a tacit agreement between the French and the Soviet intelligence about Camus’ death sound especially disturbing. In 1960, the same year of Camus’ death, an operation led by Khrushchev was carried out in order to bring Maurice Dejean, the well-known French ambassador in Moscow from 1955 to 1964, on the USSR’s side. Khrushchev said that “France is the crucial link in the chain that will bring Europe into our hands, and we must get hold of it”. In October 1959 De Gaulle formally invited Khrushchev to spend a few months in Paris. It is no wonder that Albert Camus’ reaction to the USSR leader and his foreign politics was not exactly of the friendliest kind. France and the USSR were getting closer and closer and Camus stood in the way, casting an admonishing, baneful shadow on both countries. It might have been then that the decision was taken that Camus was inconvenient; he was too popular and too charismatic for the increasingly close French-Soviet affiliation. In late March 1960 Khrushchev went on a week-long tour through France and was heartily welcomed by the PCF all over the country. What of Camus, though, the powers that be wondered? What if he publicly blamed the illustrious visitor for the gory occupation of Hungary – for the bloody suppression of his opponents; or for the Gulag? Neither of the diplomatic services involved would allow such a hostile reaction: Khrushchev was only to be praised and welcomed as befitted the leader of a prestigious allied power. Vinogradov, the USSR ambassador in Paris, a genial man and a *bon viveur*, was held in the highest regard by the French politicians and Parisian middle-class, and he never missed a public event or a celebration. A long-time good acquaintance of De Gaulle’s, he was a regular at Colombey (De Gaulle’s personal abode) before the general returned to power. France and the USSR had never been closer: six years later, misled by his not-too-unconcerned counsellors, De Gaulle would decide for France to exit NATO. Khrushchev’s 1960s visit to France was momentous, a milestone on the path of the cooperation between Paris and Moscow – a goal to be achieved at all costs. Camus died on January 4th of the same year, in broad daylight, on the large, straight, nearly empty road that led to Paris. Khrushchev’s plane would land at Orly on March 23rd and no discordant voice would be left to spoil the sumptuous, meek, welcoming chorus of voices.

In October 1956, France's major focus of public debate was the integration of West Germany into the EAEC. It was then that several anonymous letters coming from a self-proclaimed armed group for Germany's independence were delivered to hundreds of prominent people in Eastern France (the regions of the Bas-Rhin and the Haut-Rhin). All the letters bore a swastika, as well as the intentions of those nostalgic mourners of the Reich days: they referred to the recipients of the letters as the "French oppressors" and stated their intolerance of the occupation of the Alsace-Lorraine area. A threat was made to all the French people willing to force their rotten, corrupt culture upon the occupied. An especially harsh punishment would be inflicted upon French "spies, agents and teachers" for their crimes. The French police were absolutely oblivious to the existence of such an armed group existed, so their investigation was careless and their conclusion was that this particular *Kampfverband* was nothing more than a petty neo-Nazi group from Hamburg. On May 14th 1957, prefect André-Marie Trémeaud invited several *personages* to his residence in Strasbourg for the closing ceremony of an ECSC session. That morning the prefect had received a box of Havana cigars, whose alleged addresser was Havana's salesperson for Europe. Trémeaud's secretary brought him the cigars and he put them away in his drawer, intending to offer them to the party guests that night. However, the cigar box was forgotten and no one touched it before May 17th when – while he was waiting for another guest party to arrive – the prefect remembered it and handed it to his wife for her to give the cigars to the incoming guests. Madame Henriette Trémeaud went upstairs and asked her maid for a tray to arrange the cigars, then opened the box. A deafening explosion tore the room apart and Trémeaud's wife died on the spot. On investigation, the police found out that the address of the sender on the cigar box had been typed with the same typewriter used for the *Kampfverband's* letters. The French press started sowing fears of a comeback of Nazi extremism in Germany. Investigations, however, drew a blank: the dubious neo-Nazi group just seemed to be undetectable. In 1968 Ladislav Bittman, an agent of the Czech intelligence (StB) who was specialised in misinformation, defected to the West and finally shed light on the Trémeaud case. The whole operation aimed at undermining the relationship between France and Germany and had been arranged by the KGB in Moscow. The StB had then been entrusted with carrying it out. After the anonymous neo-Nazi letters were sent out, four agents of the Czech intelligence were dispatched to Paris: Miloslav Kouba, Robert Ther, Milan Kopecky and Stanislas Tomes. They were the ones who had sent the parcel bomb to prefect Trémeaud from a post office in Boulevard Diderot: their ultimate goal was to torpedo the European Economic Union and the European Single Market, which was to come into effect on January 1st 1958. The mastermind of the plan was KGB General Ivan Agayants: he would pursue his intentions of destabilising Europe and defaming West Germany up until the Sixties, fanning the fear of the neo-Nazi movement and arranging several desecrations of synagogues, Jewish cemeteries and Israelite monuments both in Europe and worldwide. The desecrations started in Cologne on December 25th 1959 and were continued in Antwerp, Copenhagen, London, Glasgow, Milan, Paris, Oslo, Stockholm and Vienna on December 31st. On January 3rd 1960 targets were hits in Athens, Manchester, Melbourne and Perth, and on January 6th there were desecrations as far as in Buenos Aires and Bogota. It was the peak of activity for the KGB and the StB; France and Germany were the sitting targets of both intelligences' plan of destabilisation.

Albert Camus was the next to fall, on a large, straight, empty road a few miles away from Paris, on January 4th 1960.

