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'The Death of Camus' Review: Examining the Wreckage

Was the car crash that killed Albert Camus and his publisher in 1960 an accident or an assassination engineered by the KGB?

Albert Camus in 1959.

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By Benjamin Shull
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On Jan. 4, 1960, the world lost one of the most profound voices of the 20th century. Albert Camus, the 46-year-old author of "The Stranger" and "The Plague" and a recent winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, was riding in the passenger seat of a Facel Vega en route to Paris when the car swerved off the road and crashed into a tree. Camus died instantly, while the driver—Camus's publisher, Michel Gallimard—would die from his injuries a few days later. The man who taught us how to face an absurd world had died an absurd death.

The Italian writer Giovanni Catelli contends that this was no accident. In his book "The Death of Camus," first published in 2013 and translated into English by Andrew Tanzi, Mr. Catelli lays out the theory that Camus's car crash was a political killing engineered by the KGB. Camus, Mr. Catelli notes, had issued various broadsides against the Soviet Union in the wake of its 1956 invasion of Hungary. Greatly charismatic and internationally revered, Camus posed a serious challenge to Moscow. He was, the author writes, "a free, indomitable and dangerous man."

In short, staccato chapters, Mr. Catelli recounts his investigation into the circumstances surrounding Camus's car crash. He also revisits the Soviet invasion of Hungary and Camus's connection to a pair of literary figures: the Czech writer Jan Zábrana and the Russian writer Boris Pasternak. Mr. Catelli's case is compelling but far from ironclad, and some readers will be more convinced than others. But his book provides a clear and useful window into the currents that political writers were forced to navigate during the Cold War.

Zábrana (1931-1984) is central to Mr. Catelli's narrative. A poet and translator whose parents were persecuted by Czechoslovakia's communist regime, he rendered Pasternak's "Doctor Zhivago" into Czech. Mr. Catelli chances one day upon Zábrana's posthumously published diaries in a Prague bookshop and alights on a passage from 1980, which reads: "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 Soviet intelligence. They rigged the tyre with a tool that eventually pierced it when the car was travelling at high speed."

Zábrana's man (who wouldn't reveal his source) told him that the order was issued by Soviet minister Dmitri Shepilov, in response to an article Camus wrote in March 1957 that attacked Shepilov over the events in Hungary. Mr. Catelli writes that Camus "let loose with all the indignation of a libertarian who refused to bow to tyranny." He first attacked Shepilov in a speech delivered on Oct. 30, 1956, during a meeting of the exiled Spanish Republican government. He continued to denounce Moscow over the next few years; in 1958, he wrote the preface to "The Truth About the Nagy Affair," a book published by the anticommunist Congress for Cultural Freedom refuting the charges brought against Imre Nagy, Hungary's revolutionary prime minister, whom the Soviets executed for treason.

Mr. Catelli can be somewhat breathless in telling his story. He says of the car crash, for instance, that "the illusory symmetry of fate had come full circle . . . a flawless convergence of fate and machination, the absolute accident and the absolute sabotage rolled into one." We're repeatedly told of Camus's heroism, that he was "far-sighted and morally superior, and therefore could pass judgement on [his] times," and that he "sought the truth of things, the human truth of the righteous who can recognise injustice, trickery, demagogy and tyranny." But Camus's value as a deeply humane writer is assured—his deeds need no hyperbolizing.

Mr. Catelli is admirable in his dogged pursuit. He strives to determine who was the source for Zábrana's diary entry, and speculates how the Soviets could have known Camus's itinerary that fateful day in 1960. He meets with Zábrana's widow, Marie Zábranová, who shares candidates who might have told her husband about the Camus incident. Certain parties get wind of Mr. Catelli's snooping, which makes for some of the most gripping passages in the book; at one point, the author is called to a rendezvous in a Prague cafe where a mystery man walks in, drops off an envelope on Mr. Catelli's table and then leaves without a word. Upon opening the letter, he finds a picture of himself, taken with a telescopic lens.

One of the book's longer digressions concerns the fraught publication of Pasternak's "Doctor Zhivago." Zábrana wouldn't live to see his translation published—the Czech edition wasn't released until 1990, after Czechoslovakia's Velvet Revolution. "Doctor Zhivago," due to Soviet censorship, was first published in an Italian version in 1957, and the CIA helped produce and distribute Russian-language copies at the Brussels Expo a year later. Camus was in touch with Pasternak during this time. Mr. Catelli notes admiring letters between the two, and reports that Camus sought to influence the jury to give Pasternak the Nobel Prize in Literature. Pasternak indeed won the Nobel in 1958—one year after Camus won his—to the great embarrassment of the Soviets, who forced him to decline it. Camus had poked his thumb once more in the eye of the Kremlin, which, if Mr. Catelli is to be believed, would soon orchestrate his demise.

In an appendix, Mr. Catelli describes the vast infiltration of French intelligence by Soviet moles during the postwar years, and reveals that the French lawyer and Algerian independence activist Jacques Vergès had heard separately of KGB involvement in Camus's death. Mr. Catelli's thesis deserves its day in court. Still, for all its merits, "The Death of Camus" relies on a good deal of speculation. It is "quite likely" that Camus's car was sabotaged the night before his death. Camus's lover, the actress María Casares, "maybe" told others that he planned to come to Paris by car rather than by train before the news reached an informer. Ultimately, Mr. Catelli may have more to say about Camus the man and writer than Camus the murder victim.

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