

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نپاشد تن من مباد بدین بوم و بر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

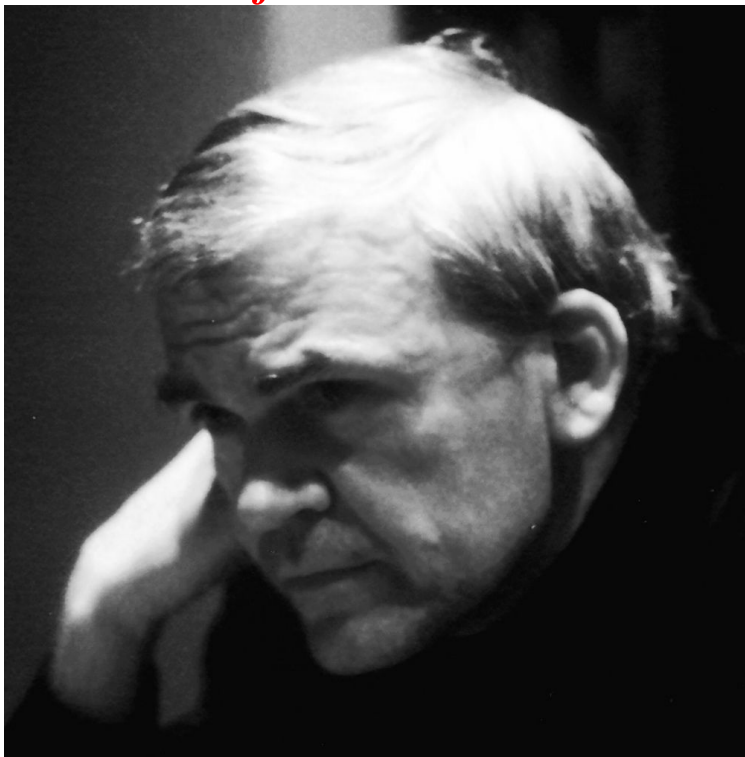
afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

by MONIKA ZGUSTOVA
21.08.2020

Prague's Fights Over Kundera: Biography From the Files of the Secret Police



Photograph Source: Elisa Cabot – [CC BY-SA 3.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/)

In 2008, while I was staying in Prague, a scandal broke out involving the Czech writer Milan Kundera, who has lived in Paris since 1975. Respekt magazine published an article claiming that Kundera had informed on a foreign spy of Czech extraction who was staying that night in the students' residence of which Kundera was then the president. No definitive, valid proof was ever found to back up this accusation, but the slander stuck: a

large part of the Czech public allowed itself to be convinced that Kundera was an informer. The writer was a victim of post-totalitarian vengefulness.

Twelve years later, Kundera has once again become a bone of contention in his country of origin. A 900-page biography has just been published in Prague by Argo-Paseka, which deals in detail with the writer's early life; the book is signed by Jan Novák, who is also a well-known writer who has lived for many years in the United States, where he went into exile with his parents when still a child.

This biography, which I have just read with tremendous interest during five days and five sleepless nights, analyzes, among other things, the story of Kundera's alleged role as an informer. Unfortunately, instead of providing us with previously unpublished details or crucial evidence, the author simply affirms that he is 'convinced' that Kundera was an informer because 'he was a Stalinist' and that 'he talks about this in one of his novels'. And this belief, based on faith rather than any definite proof, has resulted in some highly unwelcome repercussions for the biographer.

Novák's research is based on two main sources. The most frequently consulted one is the archive of the secret police, the much-feared StB, the Czech version of the German Democratic Republic's Stasi. In the film *The Lives of Others* we could see how the political police inserted a listening device in the dissident's apartment and thus managed to discover everything that was said and done in the man's flat: they also controlled Kundera in just this way. Without a doubt, if a biographer goes sniffing about in police archives of this nature, he will find out certain intimate details about his subject. The use of such information is, at least, questionable: is it ethical to base a biography on data which have been illegally obtained?, I asked myself as I read.

The other source used for the book is that provided by a contemporary friend of Kundera's: the psychiatrist and sexologist Ivo Pondělíček. Thanks to his declarations, we learn about some of the most intimate details of Kundera's private life. The biographer, assisted by Kundera's tattling friend, describes Kundera as a man who was afraid of and yet used women, a man with various sexual pathologies.

This biography, which has barely been in the shops for a fortnight and has already gone into a second edition, has given rise to some genuinely passionate reactions. Some readers greatly admire its style and approach: Novák, who lived in Chicago for three decades, has adopted the Anglo-Saxon way of writing biographies, using sarcasm and

scandal whenever he feels them to be necessary. And a scandal is what he has created: the rest of his Czech readers are absolutely furious.

The critics have been merciless. The political scientist Ondřej Slačálek has said that Novák is “a loyal collaborator of the Communist secret police;” the journalist Petr Zídek has called him “Kundera’s public prosecutor;” the professor of literature Petr Bílek claims that “Novák, the dilettante, has made Kundera out to be a scoundrel;” the historian Pavel Kosatík has stated that the book is a “muckraking machine,” and writer Radka Denemarková says “the book isn’t about Kundera, it is about Novák. Each page reeks of an inflated ego and endless sadism”.

Novák has already written the first chapter of the second volume, which will be about the French part of the life of Kundera, an author who, in the West too, arouses both mistrust and admiration. There will, in the future, be yet more altercations both for and against Kundera.

CounterPunch 20.08.2020