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Faction fighter

If the influence of intellectuals is measured by the hatred they inspire, Bernard-Henri Lévy must be one of the most influential alive. It seems that no one can write about BHL – a uniquely French intellectual working at the intersection of politics, journalism and the academy – without dilating on his glamorous good looks, “sumptuous” apartment and “pouting” actress-wife. The rancour appears most splenic in Britain, where there is no thinker with a comparable public profile and philosophers affect a certain pride in obscurity. The reaction against Lévy is little less venomous in France.

No doubt sheer jealousy accounts for much of the spleen, but that can hardly be the whole story. Lévy first came to notice in the mid-Seventies as the leading figure of the “new philosophers”, who turned against Marxism when it was still the official creed of a large part of the French intelligentsia. In *Barbarism with a Public Face* he renounced his youthful Marxist-Leninist convictions and recounted the colossal costs of the Soviet experiment.

Lévy's unfashionable anti-communism earned him the undying hatred of the French intellectual left. Yet his view of the Soviet Union was

JOHN GRAY

Who Killed Daniel Pearl?

By Bernard-Henri Lévy

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closer to the truth than conventional perceptions of the time. He was rewarded by being denounced as a CIA agent: a charge levelled by Jean-Paul Sartre, as he recalls in his recent study of the ghastly old fraud.

More even than his glamorous lifestyle, it is Lévy's skill in showing up the unreality of the conventional world-view that has most infuriated his critics. In *Who Killed Daniel Pearl?* he applies his contrarian intelligence to the kidnapping and murder on camera of the *Wall Street Journal* reporter, who was abducted in Karachi in January 2002. Behind the story of this atrocity, Lévy argues, lies a still darker tale.

Pearl was killed, he maintains, because he learnt of links between radical Islamic elements in the ISI (Pakistan's intelligence service), Pakistani scientists and al Qaeda.



Bernard-Henri Lévy with his actress wife Arielle Dombasle

This nexus threatens an era of terrorism, in which suicide warriors will come equipped with nuclear devices. In Lévy's view, Pearl's death was “the beginning of the grand struggle of the century”.

In some ways, this is a compelling tale. Lévy is hardly the first to suggest links between Pakistani intelligence and radical Islam: there is evidence the ISI played a pivotal role in establishing the Taliban in Afghanistan. Pakistan could become the world's first nuclear-equipped failed state. It presents a greater danger than North Korea, and incomparably more than Saddam's Iraq.

The trouble is that these facts and judgements do nothing to support Lévy's account of the reasons behind Pearl's murder. He describes this book as a *romanquete* – a cross between a novel and a piece of

investigative journalism. In a context such as this, though, blurring fact with fiction is singularly unhelpful.

The reader needs to be told what is known and what is hypothesised. What exactly did Pearl find out, and when? When, and why, was the decision made to murder him? These may well be unanswerable questions, but if so Lévy had best admit it, otherwise the reader is left frustrated – and Lévy's critics vindicated. By boldly mixing genres in this fascinating book, he has handed his many enemies another stick with which to beat him. An intriguing experiment on an important theme, *Who Killed Daniel Pearl?* would be more satisfying if it had been written as straight journalism.

John Gray's *Straw Dogs* is published by Granta