
To Kill the Pope: An Ecclesiastical Thriller by Tad Szulc (2000), 315 pages.



It has been a pleasure to read this new book by Tad Szulc. In January 1997 we reviewed his Pope John Paul II: The Biography, which reads like an exciting novel because of the writer's captivating prose. Then, in May 1998, we looked at his Chopin in Paris for which, we are proud to say, the author used our Library's collections in his research. Some of our members may not know that Tad Szulc was an eminent foreign correspondent for the New York Times for many years and is the author of a dozen fine books.

You mean, dear Reader, that you never heard of Pope Gregory XVII who was almost killed at St. Peter's Square in 1981? He loved to listen to Chopin's Scherzo No.3 in C sharp while drafting important encyclicals. He had been the outstanding archbishop of Marseille, had studied at Clermont Ferrand in the Vichy governed zone of France while the Nazis ran Europe. If you begin to worry about the loss of

your memory, the author comes to the rescue. He informs us that this novel is pure fiction, but it is constructed so convincingly that you believe every word of it. Some of the narrative is based on facts, and we are kept spellbound to learn the outcome of a devilish plot, going back to pope Pius V who ruled during the Council of Trent in 1545. This was during the reign of King Zygmunt the Elder in Poland. But there is little tedious history in this novel, just enough to whet your appetite.

The hero is Tim Savage, a brilliant American student at Georgetown University in Washington D.C. who, upon graduation, joins the CIA and, in due course, is dispatched to Vietnam as an "operative" in the secret Phoenix Program. Here he encounters some obnoxious individuals, including a certain Jake Kurtski, a Pole with a killer instinct. The Vietnam experience changes Tim's life radically. Many moons later one finds him in Rome as a Jesuit priest, an expert of the Islamic world. To his surprise, he receives an astonishing assignment from the Vatican to investigate who was really behind the attempted assassination of the pope. In pursuit of this task he travels extensively, first to Istanbul, where a Polish priest offers an extremely important hint about the 1981 event; then he goes to Paris where most significant encounters take place, and continues to Toulouse in southern France: here additional revelations are disclosed. Ultimately Tim arrives, in the Languedoc district, visiting some God forsaken villages and chateaux near the Pyrenees Mountains. Szulc is a master at producing authentic scenes in the foreign settings, and this is true of all his books. There are details of the Porta Pinciana in Rome, descriptions of the Mensa Hotel next to the Pyramids, the panorama of the Calata Bridge in Istanbul and good instructions how to find the Stalingrad Metro station in Paris, all of which could only come from the local resident or an expert guide. As usual, the author leads the reader step by step.

We won't reveal the plot let it be said only that danger lurks around every corner in this genuine thriller, but romance is also present. As behoves a clever detective, Savage is successful in uncovering the unsavory secrets. The roman a clef is an attempt to offer an account of the "true" reasons behind the 1981 event. Names are fictionalized and events changed to protect sources whom the author believes. The result is a gripping story of conspiracy, international intrigue, and betrayal. It is a smashing success as a novel, and it should be made into a movie. Congratulations Tad Szulc!

George Suboczewski