

***Happy* Witness: Slain Photographer Camille Lepage Remembered**

French photojournalist Camille Lepage was killed at the age of 26 in the Central African Republic. Despite her youth, her passing leaves a huge hole in crisis reporting. Memories from a German friend and colleague.

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Christian Putsch (2014-05-14) ami allemand de Camille

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DIE WELT Camille Lepage in March 2014 in a market in Bangui, capital of the Central African Republic. Photo: Christian Putsch

CAPE TOWN — In the evening she always sat at the same slightly wobbly table in front of Hotel Levy's in Bangui, hunched over her laptop, her camera within easy reach. We, her colleagues, sat at the same table talking about our day in the [Central African Republic](#). Jokes made the rounds, taking a bit of the edge off the pain we'd experienced. But Camille Lepage, usually never at a loss for words, said nothing as she worked with her day's batch of photographs.

She never sent her work out before she had checked the latest photos down to the final details, and captioned each one of them. Her work held her firmly in its grip. Photo by photo, she tried to make this incomprehensible crisis, the conflict between Muslims and Christians, a little more graspable. Few could claim to have done as much first-hand reporting about what has been happening there.

Camille was killed on Monday evening in Bouar near the border between Cameroon and the Central African Republic. She had been traveling with a group of Christian anti-balaka ("anti-machete") militiamen. The men had avoided the checkpoints manned by African Union soldiers. It was a dangerous and courageous thing for her to be doing. She wanted to provide some insight into the way the militia — which has been terrorizing large parts of the Muslim population in the region — worked.

According to sources, Camille was in a car with four anti-balaka fighters who were also killed in the incident. There are a number of indications that they were the victims of an ambush. Camille's body was found in a car by French soldiers out on patrol. What isn't clear is if she and those with her were the victims of a rival anti-balaka group or of the Séléka rebel coalition.

[France's President François Hollande](#) announced that all necessary measures would be taken "to cast light on the circumstances of this murder and to find the murderers." French investigators are on their way to Bangui.

Too young

Overwhelmingly comprised of Muslims from the northern part of the country and mercenaries from Sudan and Chad, the Séléka overthrew the government in March 2013 and assumed power temporarily. For months, the Séléka has been involved in a bloody fight with the anti-balaka militia — a battle that so far has cost the lives of more than 10,000 people. In early May, two local reporters were killed in Bangui while trying to report on the predominantly Muslim residents of the city's PK5 area.

It needs to be said again: Camille Lepage was 26 years old. And this needs to be said not only in the context of her dramatically early death, but the impressive achievements of her short life. She leaves behind major [photographic documentation](#) of this oppressed country and its political and humanitarian crises, to

which the international community has reacted with such shameful reluctance. These are pictures of the dead and dying, of hospitals and refugee camps, of murder in the streets.

But Camille also took pictures of lighter moments in daily life — a fashion show, a guitar player in a market. She wanted to show other sides of this country, [not just the war](#) that otherwise focused most of the attention. She was one of the few foreigners who occasionally went to the legendary Zodiac Club in Bangui to dance the night away.

We met in March at Levy's Hotel. Nearly all journalists in Bangui stay in this run-down block of concrete that my colleague Johannes Dieterich of the [Accurate](#) describes as "simple, but shabby." In the face of temperatures over 35 °C (95 °F) the air-conditioning system had long ago given up the ghost, although there was electricity mostly thanks to a noisy generator in the back court. Shower water and Internet access were less reliable.

Camille had been living for many months in this place that most exhausted journalists leave after about a week. With her grin, possibly the broadest in the whole city, and her fast-paced French, the freelancer had talked the hotel manager down from \$50 to \$15 a day for her room on the second floor.

She often began her days before sunrise if she got yet another call from a source. Camille had a network that included everybody from the imam at the mosque to the commander of the anti-balaka militia, Séléka fighters, soldiers, political analysts as well as simple citizens. Hardly anyone was as well-connected as this small, energy-charged woman. And Camille stayed in touch with them, cared about the people she met in the refugee camps. It would make the [photographer](#) sick with worry if one of the people in a camp didn't come to the phone to talk to her.

Pharrell ringtone

And yet the misery that Camille documented on a daily basis didn't break her. At Levy's, not a single day went by when she didn't loudly sing along to Pharrell Williams's "Happy." In fact the song was her cell phone ringtone, Swedish journalist Katarina Højje recalls. Højje spent several months in the room next to Camille's at the hotel. "Her good mood was contagious. And her interest in people was sincere. She earned the trust of the people she reported on," Højje says.

Few people knew as much as Camille about this conflict, which goes well beyond its religious dimension. And few have shared their contacts in so natural a way. Camille passed on telephone numbers of people who could help one understand the influence of politics, neighboring countries, or class differences on the population.

She helped me with crucial contacts and advice when I was researching a longer piece that appeared in .

By comparison with the crises in Ukraine or [Syria](#), the crisis in the Central African Republic — despite the UN warning about the [“extremely grave” situation](#) — has not really registered on the world’s radar. Camille wanted to change that, in whatever way she could. She leaves a huge information vacuum behind her.

I asked Camille why she was here. We were sitting in a little watering hole on a lively street after we had both reported on a Bangui market that had to change location because of the crisis. She told me that even as a child she’d dreamt of living in places that didn’t interest anyone. “I didn’t think it was right that the stories of people living in such places weren’t told because there wasn’t any money to be made from them.” When she visited her friends in France, she continued, she didn’t understand why they thought her job was so unusual when it seemed self-evident to her.

In July 2012, not long after she’d completed her journalism studies and published freelance work in France, Camille went to South Sudan to report on the destiny of the newly-created nation. In October 2013 she moved on, to Bangui, the capital of the Central African Republic. Shortly before her death she had found a room to rent because she wanted to stay until 2015 at least — the earliest possible date for elections. Camille wanted to be there to cover the return to peace, and she would have been doing that for leading media.

Her work appeared in , , the , the , and on the BBC, among other media. Camille was a complete pro. She covered the manufacturer’s name printed in white on her black camera with dark tape, and when I asked her if it was because she didn’t want to advertise the name she said: “It’s not that — it distracts people when I photograph them. They look at the writing, not into the camera.”

Courage, not recklessness, was her partner in work. She apparently wasn’t wearing a bulletproof vest when she died — not that that would have likely helped her much in an ambush. Camille was not an adrenaline junkie; she always tried to gauge the risk factor. But when in doubt, she went for it.

[ABOUT THE SOURCE](#)

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