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Gayle K. Brunelle and Annette Finley-Croswhite, *Murder in the Métro: Laetitia Toureaux and the Cagoule in 1930s France*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2010. xvii + 266 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$39.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8071-3616-4; \$19.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-8071-4561-6.

Review by Sean Kennedy, University of New Brunswick.

Between January and September 1937, France was rocked by a spate of assassinations and ongoing violence. Prominent figures such as the Russian-born economist, Dimitri Navachine and the Italian anti-Fascist dissidents, Carlo and Nello Rosselli, were murdered. Saboteurs destroyed aircraft that the Popular Front government secretly intended for the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War. Bombings targeted the Parisian headquarters of two national employers' associations. Amidst this havoc, one might think that the stabbing of Laetitia Toureaux in the Paris metro on 16 May of that year was a coincidence, but that was not the case. In this absorbing book, Gayle Brunelle and Annette Finley-Croswhite unravel the complex web of relationships behind these events, and argue that a deadly threat to the very existence of the French Third Republic has been underestimated.

That threat emanated from a clandestine terrorist organization best known by its nickname, the Cagoule. Formed in 1936 and officially known as the Comité Secret d'Action Révolutionnaire (CSAR) or the Organisation Secrète d'Action Révolutionnaire Nationale (OSARN, sometimes shortened to OSAR), the movement was created by disillusioned members of the far-right Action Française. Men such as Eugène Deloncle, a naval engineer and war veteran, and Jean Filliol, a former employee of Hachette, were extremists who believed that new measures, going beyond the violent rhetoric and demonstrations of the nationalist leagues, were needed in order to defeat the Popular Front.

Adopting a military structure, the Cagoule received lavish funding from a number of businessmen and support from foreign powers as it embarked upon a campaign to undermine the government. Brunelle and Finley-Croswhite contend that because of its ultimate failure and because of the dynamics of French politics, too many specialists on interwar France have dismissed the Cagoule "as a group of bumbling fringe armchair extremists" (p. 201). On the whole, they offer a compelling refutation of such a portrait.

The authors begin by reconstructing the investigation of Laetitia Toureaux's murder. On the surface, she was an unexceptional member of Paris's large Italian immigrant community; she, her siblings and mother had made their way to the capital from the Valle d'Aosta. At the time of her death, she was working in a wax polish factory and sometimes in the coat-checks of the dance-halls she frequented. Charming and adventurous, she attracted male attention. But the authorities soon discovered that there was considerably more. Born Laetitia Nourrisat in 1907, in 1929 she had married Jules Toureaux, the son of a wealthy former employer. The match, which ended with his death in 1935, crossed class boundaries and was controversial. Jules had kept the marriage a secret from his parents until shortly before he died and Laetitia's father, still living in Italy, had also raised objections. Most intriguing of all, Laetitia Toureaux had been employed by at least one private detective firm with connections to the police, and had spied on her co-workers and probably a variety of other organizations as well.

Though Toureaux's murder was never solved, the evidence pointed to the Cagoule. In the second part of the book, the authors provide a deft analysis of the organization. Its leaders were often well educated; many had served in the Great War and retained military connections. Though the French far right of the 1930s is often associated with literary intellectuals such as Charles Maurras, Robert Brasillach and Pierre Drieu La Rochelle, a number of Cagouards had engineering and business backgrounds. There were tensions within the group, for example between the violent Jean Filliol and the more cautious Gabriel Jeantet, a member of the *haute bourgeoisie* who helped to broker arms deals. Nevertheless, the Cagoule leadership was bound together by fanatical right-wing views, intense socializing and an affluent lifestyle rooted in Paris's posh sixteenth arrondissement.

The authors concede that some Cagouards were inept. Aristide Corre, their ostensible ideologist, kept a diary and a membership list in his apartment, which proved very useful to the police when they eventually searched the premises. But there is also considerable evidence of the movement's frightening potential. The police were most concerned about the quantity of arms it had amassed, which was far in excess of its likely membership. The Cagoule also sought to infiltrate the police, cultivated senior military officers, and developed links with the Spanish Nationalists and the secret service of the Italian Fascist regime, the OVRA (Organization for Vigilance and the Repression of Anti-Fascism). Indeed, it was Cagouards who murdered the Rosselli brothers on Mussolini's behalf, in exchange for aid in procuring arms.

By the fall of 1937, however, the group's prospects looked grim. Deloncle had hoped that the September 1937 bombing attacks on the employers' associations would be attributed to the Communists and provide a catalyst for a right-wing takeover. Instead, the police stepped up their investigation of the Cagoule and, thanks to Aristide Corre's carelessness, soon had a list of members. In November, Deloncle, aware that the ring was closing, warned the military of an impending Communist insurrection and tried to provoke a right-wing uprising, but to no avail. Before long he and other key figures were under arrest, though some organizers, including Filliol and Jeantet, managed to flee abroad.

Securing convictions of the Cagouards proved difficult. They had prominent defenders and the right-wing press now disingenuously contended that the movement had never really posed a threat and was in fact largely a left-wing fabrication. As the Second World War broke out, a growing number of suspects were released to serve at the front and the proceedings were suspended. Though the trial resumed in 1946, the intervening war years had changed the situation profoundly. Some prominent conspirators, notably Deloncle (who had become a leading collaborationist), were dead. Moreover, while some Cagouards supported Vichy to the bitter end, others had gravitated towards the resistance, which helps to explain why many of the sentences passed were relatively light. Above all, the authors contend, until recently French society has been unwilling to fully confront the bitter divisions of the 1930s, a trend encouraged by the fact that some former Cagouards became prominent figures after 1945. Gabriel Jeantet, for example, was an associate of François Mitterrand.

As for Laetitia Toureaux, although the evidence is not conclusive, the authors propose an intriguing interpretation of her fate; readers seeking to avoid a spoiler might want to move on to the next paragraph. It turns out that Toureaux may have worked for Mussolini's regime for years, providing intelligence about the Italian immigrant community; testimony from a friend indicated that politically she inclined towards Fascism. Brunelle and Finley-Crowwhite suggest that she may have developed contacts with the Cagoule through their Italian patrons. The police believed that she was the mistress of Gabriel Jeantet, and she may have met other members of the group in the dance halls they all frequented. More generally, Toureaux's sleuthing abilities and attractiveness would have made her useful to the Cagoule, which employed a number of women as couriers and recruiters. By the spring of 1937, it seems, she had become afraid and was looking for a way out. But by then she knew too much about the group, possibly including its plans to kill the Rossellis. After Cagouards apparently bungled

two assassination attempts—which are mentioned only briefly—the OVRA sent in a professional to kill her.

While their conclusions about Toureaux's death are speculative, in tracing her story the authors offer thought-provoking observations about French politics and society in the 1930s. As they note in an appendix surveying the relevant historiography, several other historians have suggested that the Cagoule posed a serious threat.^[1] But Brunelle and Finley-Croswhite are right to argue that further work is needed to appreciate the group's significance. Recently, Chris Millington has suggested that scholars need to reconsider the significance of political violence in interwar France, which has sometimes been downplayed, and *Murder in the Métro* offers a useful contribution in this regard.^[2]

Moreover, in contextualizing their analysis of Toureaux and the Cagoule, the authors offer food for thought about key interwar institutions, such the press and the police. The tone of the former grew increasingly sensationalistic and moralizing as initial sympathy for Toureaux soon gave way to reports of social climbing and promiscuity.^[3] The authors interpret this reaction as evidence of increasingly conservative attitudes regarding gender roles during the 1930s, though they also conclude that, from Toureaux's perspective, it was her class and ethnic background that provided the major obstacles to her achieving a higher social status. As for the police, they proved to be fairly effective in combating the Cagoule, but corruption and politicization were significant problems; Brunelle's and Finley-Croswhite's findings reaffirm the importance of understanding how the forces of order functioned during this era.^[4]

A few points made in the book need clarification and others would have benefited from elaboration. For instance, while it may have supported parliamentary candidates at times, the Action Française was loath to describe itself as a political party (p. 101). Allusions to Admiral François Darlan's association with the Cagoule are made, but not elaborated upon (pp. 161, 165). The fiery right-wing Parisian municipal councillor, Charles Trochu, and the Front National (an early attempt to unify the nationalist leagues after the 6 February 1934 riots) are mentioned but not fully identified (pp. 126-127).^[5] Admittedly, the reader is already confronted with a fulsome cast of characters, but additional context would further elucidate the fractious character of right-wing politics at the time, as different formations elaborated strategies for combating the Popular Front and competed fiercely to dominate the nationalist cause.

That said, the authors have written an engaging study which draws the reader in with the murder mystery, while making an important argument about the perils of French politics in the 1930s. They evoke the chaos and uncertainty of the country's protracted interwar crisis while engaging with broader issues pertaining to social trends, the role of the media, the destabilizing impact of the Spanish Civil War, the evolution of political terrorism and the wavering attitudes of elements of the French elite regarding the survival of the Republic. This is a book which can appeal to wide audience.

NOTES

[1] Two impressive short analyses include Joel Blatt, "The Cagoule Plot, 1936-1937," in Kenneth Mouré and Martin S. Alexander, eds., *Crisis and Renewal in France, 1918-1962* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2002), pp. 86-104 and D.L.L. Parry, "Counter Revolution by Conspiracy, 1935-1937," in Nicholas Atkin and Frank Tallett, eds., *The Right in France: From Revolution to Le Pen*, 2nd ed. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003), pp. 161-181.

[2] On the evolving historiography see Chris Millington, "Political Violence in Interwar France," *History Compass* 10:3(2012): 246-259; for an interpretation suggesting the limited significance of political violence, see Serge Bernstein, "L'Affrontement simulé des années 30," *Vingtième siècle* 5(1985): 39-53.

[3] For a fascinating analysis of what media coverage of murder cases can reveal about the social fabric of France in the 1930s, see Sarah Maza, *Violette Nozière: A Story of Murder in 1930s Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

[4] On the police, see, for example, Jean-Marc Berlière, *Le Monde des polices en France, XIXe-XXe siècles* (Brussels: Éditions Complexe, 1996) and Simon Kitson, "Police and Politics in Marseille, 1936-8," *European History Quarterly* 37:1(2007): 81-108.

[5] On Trochu and the Front National, see Jacques Nobécourt, *Le Colonel de La Rocque 1885-1946, ou les pièges du nationalisme chrétien* (Paris: Fayard, 1996), pp. 278-281.

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