

POLICING DEGAULLE'S FRANCE

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The Ben Barka Scandal

By George Herald

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SOME FRENCHMEN are calling the scenario "Thundergaulle," others have labeled it "To Rabat with Love." But despite their respect for the inventive powers of the late Ian Fleming, they feel the creator of James Bond never came up with a tale as explosive as that of the kidnapping of Moroccan labor leader Mehid Ben Barka in front of a drug store on Boulevard St. Germain at 12:30 P.M. last October 29.

Ben Barka, to be sure, was not the first political exile ever abducted on a Paris street. The agents of Stalin and Mussolini similarly dispatched several others, and the French secret services themselves have not always been above such methods. The kidnapping of Algerian rebel chief Ahmed Ben Bella in a commercial airplane in 1956 is still well remembered, and so is the abduction of French Secret Army Organization (OAS) leader Antoine Argoud from a Munich hotel in 1962.

The Ben Barka scandal is special, however, because it has revealed that behind the virtuous facade of the Gaullist regime there could oc-

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cur a shocking connivance between the police, the secret service, various so-called "parallel" police organizations, and a mafia of thugs and ex-convicts. Perhaps most shocked and embarrassed was General de Gaulle himself, for the evident negligence and malfeasance of his subordinates tarnishes his image as an all-seeing father figure with everything under control. He is said to feel let down and betrayed by his own chosen subordinates.

Many Frenchmen see in the Ben Barka drama a kind of new Dreyfus affair that is bound to be kept alive for many months, if not years. It will almost certainly become a significant campaign issue in the French general elections in spring 1967, and the opposition has already started exploiting it for all that it is worth. At the same time, its international implications are grave. The affair has strained the relations between France and Morocco to the breaking point and may yet lead to the downfall of King Hassan II. It is also likely to affect the already strained friendship between France and the United States because many people around de Gaulle, including Nobel-prize winner Francois Mauriac, are insinuating, so far without any proof,

that the American CIA had a hand in Ben Barka's disappearance.

Trying to sift indisputable facts from second-hand accounts based on unproven testimonies is not an easy matter in this case. Here, however, are the essential and established facts:

On October 29, Ben Barka had a date at the restaurant Lipp with movie director Georges Franjus, journalist Philippe Bernier and "repented" ex-convict George Figon to discuss a common film project. The meeting, a trap arranged by Figon, never took place. When Ben Barka stepped out of a taxi in front of the St. Germain corner drug store next to Lipp, he was approached by police inspectors Louis Souchon and Raymond Voitot. They showed him their tricolor credentials and asked him to follow them. He did so without suspicion, particularly since they took him to an official police car. Except for the fact that Ben Barka was accompanied by a Moroccan student, Mohamed Azemouri, who witnessed the scene and immediately alerted Ben Barka's brother Abdelkader, the world probably would never have learned how the victim disappeared.

The police car already had three occupants when Ben Barka ap-

proached it: the two "retired" gangsters, Julian Le Ny and Jean Palisse, and *Air France* flight manager Antoine Lopez, wearing dark glasses and a false beard. Because of his key position at Orly airport, Lopez had often been used as an informer by the French counter-espionage and the narcotics squad. Together with Souchon and Voitot, they took Ben Barka to a villa at Fontenay-le-Vicomte, near Orly, which belonged to ex-gangster Georges Boucheseiche, now the owner of a number of shady "hotels" in Paris and Casablanca.

Ben Barka was left at the villa together with Le Ny and Palisse. Lopez and the two policemen returned to Paris, and did not again see or hear from their victim. To date, no one knows for sure what happened to him after he entered the villa.

A SECOND SEQUENCE of proven events began the day after the kidnapping. On Saturday, October 30, at 5 P.M., General Mohammad Oufkir, the Moroccan Minister of Interior, arrived at Orly airport where he was met by major Ahmed Dlimi, head of the Moroccan security police, Hamid Chtouki, chief of the secret service, and police inspector El Mahi. All three were in Paris to prepare for the state visit of King Hassan II, scheduled for November 11 (and later cancelled).

El Mahi had booked a room for General Oufkir at the Royal-Alma hotel, but it has been established that he did not stay there. Oufkir took a plane for Geneva from Orly the next morning at 5 A.M. to visit his family in the Swiss resort town of Gstaad. He claims that he did not meet anyone involved in the Ben Barka kidnapping while he was in Paris. But he has so far failed to explain his activities here during the 12 hours from 5 P.M. Saturday to 5 A.M. Sunday.

These are the objective facts of the case. Everything else is based



MEHID BEN BARKA

on largely concurring testimony of participants interrogated separately. According to these depositions, the Ben Barka kidnapping was instigated by General Oufkir. He considered Ben Barka, who had twice been sentenced to death for contumacy, to be his worst political enemy. He knew that King Hassan, seeking a broader political base at home, had sent emissaries to the labor leader, promising him a royal pardon if he came back from exile

and entered the government. Oufkir was allegedly afraid of being forced out of office, and felt he had to act before Ben Barka returned.

Through his connections with various French "parallel" police, Oufkir is believed to have secured the cooperation of Figon, Boucheseiche and other underworld characters, offering them a total award of \$200,000. He also is believed to have obtained the help of Lopez, who had long been eying a well-

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paid directorial post with Royal Air Maroc.

When Oufkir landed at Orly on October 30, Lopez, by his own admission, took him directly from the airport to Boucheseiche's villa, where Ben Barka was held. Figon, who has since committed a controversial "suicide," made an equally controversial confession a few days before his death, in which he affirmed having been present while Oufkir tortured Ben Barka with the edge of a sword until he fainted. By Figon's account, Ben Barka was then transported to Lopez' villa at Ormoy and tied to the boiler in the basement. It is presumed that, during the night from Saturday to Sunday, he was either killed and buried on the spot or taken to Orly, dead or alive, and whisked away to Morocco aboard a private plane; but for this there is no material evidence.

All the various testimonies raised more questions than they answered. While Oufkir might have been motivated by hatred and his accomplices by greed, it was more difficult to explain the participation of two highly respected veteran policemen like Souchon and Voitot in the plot. They claimed that Lopez had told them the operation was "covered" by top French officials in the know, including Jacques Foccart, the grey eminence of the Elysee Palace. Figon, for his part, asserted that he too was "covered" by Gaullist Deputy Pierre Lemarchand, a close friend of Minister of Interior Roger Frey. Lemarchand used to run one of those "parallel" police that distinguished themselves in the struggle against the OAS in the early '60s.

Whatever the truth may be, Lopez really did act as if he considered himself covered. On Sunday morning, immediately after Oufkir had left Paris, Lopez reported the strange happenings of the previous 36 hours to Commander Marcel Leroy, his superior in the Counter-intelligence Service. Leroy passed

on the information to General Jacquier, the head of the service, and to police commissary Leon Caille, the second in command at the Paris Prefecture. Caille, through Lemarchand, called in Figon, who came clean on November 2. Souchon and Voitot admitted their participation in the kidnapping on November 3. No one was taken into custody at that time.

Meanwhile Ben Barka's brother had alerted the French Ministry of Justice, and Judge Louis Zollinger had started looking for the kidnapers. But the police told him **nothing**, letting the judge fend for himself for 13 days. Only after



Figon leaked his version of the story to the opposition weekly *Express* were Lopez, Souchon, Voitot, Bernier and El Mahi arrested. Figon and the other truants could not be found.

Anti-Gaullists indignantly charge that the story was deliberately suppressed to avoid embarrassing President de Gaulle in his reelection campaign, which ran from November 4 to December 19. They claim that even after Souchon's arrest, the details of the story were kept hidden from the public and that certain high officials, as well as Deputy Lemarchand, made demonstrably false statements.

NO ONE ACCUSES General de Gaulle himself of complicity in the attempt to suppress the Ben Barka scandal. There is a consensus that he is sincerely trying to find an answer to the crucial question of the case: whether high-placed Frenchmen actually knew beforehand of Oufkir's kidnapping project, as Lopez affirms, and not only did nothing to thwart it but actually endorsed it. The General seems to suspect this, for he has already fired General Jacquier, the chief of Counterintelligence, and his aide Leroy. If it were proven that Pierre Lemarchand also had fore-knowledge of the plot, de Gaulle might come to more far-reaching conclusions, with drastic consequences for many associates.

For the time being, France has withdrawn its ambassador from Rabat, and Judge Zollinger has issued a warrant of arrest against Oufkir. These measures are considered a first warning to King Hassan that one does not tangle with the President of France. De Gaulle also feels that those involved in the Ben Barka scandal should be taught not to tangle with his policy of cooperation with underdeveloped countries which is based on a refusal to draw distinctions between domestic political regimes.

The General has always been careful not to identify himself too closely with the Gaullist UNR party. As election time approaches, he may use the Ben Barka affair as a lever to dissociate himself even more strongly from certain Gaullist followers who fail to follow him scrupulously enough. He is expected to insist more than ever that he is the President of "all the people" and that he plans to stay in office even if the majority in the National Assembly should change in 1967. Up to now, Paris political observers have wondered whether Gaullism is going to survive de Gaulle. Since the Ben Barka kidnapping, it rather looks as if de Gaulle will be trying to survive Gaullism.

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