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CPYRGHT

Who Kidnapped Ben Barka?

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A time and a place for everything? Even for political kidnapping, it would seem. At any rate the case of Mehdi Ben Barka is making the headlines even in the sort of Paris newspapers usually more concerned with *crimes passionnels* or *Série noire* gangsterdom. The scenario and the bit-players may be James Bondish, however, but the victim was a man of real stature and the repercussions may be international.

Mehdi Ben Barka was a veteran Moroccan nationalist, a former Speaker of the House of Assembly and one of the founders of the left-wing, non-communist Union Nationale des Forces Populaires (UNFP). Internationally, he was almost the only person respected and liked both by Nasser and the Baath, by Ben Bella and by Boumedienne. At the time of his kidnapping he was concerned with initial preparations for the Havana Three Continents conference scheduled for January - a fact which led certain commentators to suggest (almost certainly erroneously) that the CIA might have been involved in his removal from the scene.

Twice condemned to death in absentia by King Hassan's regime, Ben Barka was negotiating with the government to ensure that a general amnesty for UNFP leaders in Morocco should be formally extended to himself. If this were done, Ben Barka was prepared to return to Morocco and resume discussions with the Palace about the terms on which his party, the most dynamic political force in the country, would enter the government. His European base was in Geneva where, it was later said, at least one attempt had been made to kill him, just as most people believed that an attempt had been made in Morocco in 1962 in a staged car accident.

On Friday 29 October Ben Barka had just arrived in Paris. He had a luncheon engagement at the Brasserie Lipp, an old landmark of Saint Germain life, opposite the Café Flore where tourists like to gawp at the old haunt of Sartre and the Existentialists. Ben Barka's engagement was known to several people, including Georges Figon, who specialises in films about the underworld and has himself served seven years' hard labour for armed robbery. Figon has since disappeared. Others at the rendezvous were the great French *cinéaste* Georges Franju and a journalist who has subsequently been held for questioning.

Ben Barka never reached the Brasserie Lipp. On the corner of the boulevard, about 100 yards from the Brasserie, there stands the latest, most glittering testimony to the creeping coca-colonisation of Paris. Le Drugstore de Saint Germain served as appropriate literary background for the kidnapping. Just as Ben Barka, accompanied by Azemmouri, a Moroccan reading for a doctorate at the Sorbonne, passed the drugstore, two plain-clothes French policemen came up to him, showed him their cards and hustled him into a car. Azemmouri was prevented from taking the number of the car by two other men, who subsequently got into another car which followed the one in which Ben Barka was held. Azemmouri seems to have believed that Ben Barka had genuinely been taken in for questioning by the French police. Even Ben Barka may have thought the same, since he does not seem to have made any very violent resistance - or he may have believed that he was being taken away simply to negotiate with representatives of the Moroccan regime. The delay in alerting the French police authorities may have been responsible for Ben Barka's death.

One intriguing point was that the two policemen were, in fact, policemen, Louis Souchon and Roger Voitot, both members of the special anti-drug squad. It was in this capacity that they had got to know Antoine Lopez, an Air Maroc official at Orly airport, who seems to have worked at different times both for France's secret service (or rather for one of its many parallel sections) and for the Moroccan secret police, who are known to have special brigades watching potential opposition leaders. Lopez seems to have recruited not only Souchon and Voitot but also Jean Palisse and two of his henchmen. Palisse and his men were in a car which followed that of Lopez, Ben Barka and the two policemen to the villa of Georges Boucheseiche, a former lieutenant of the famous underworld king. Boucheseiche has extensive interests in Morocco, including a night-club of Sidney Greenstreet standards with amenable hostesses. At his villa outside Paris he regularly entertained prominent Moroccans attached to the Embassy in a secret service rather than diplomatic capacity.

Once Ben Barka was safely held in the villa, Lopez telephoned to Morocco to speak to the Minister of the Interior, General Oufkir. Oufkir's record of repression and the use of torture against political opponents in the mass round-up of UNFP members in July 1963, suggests that political kidnapping would not be repugnant to him. What is not so certain is whether King Hassan knew of the plot and whether either he or Oufkir wanted Ben Barka killed or merely to have him smuggled back to Morocco, where he could be told to accept Palace terms for

entering the government or else disappear forever. Lopez's position at Orly would have made him a vital accomplice in another trunk operation on the lines of the Egyptian capture of the spy Louk in Rome.

According to one version, Oufkir said he must talk to his 'patron'. This implied involvement of the King is borne out by the King's refusal to dismiss his Minister of the Interior. On the other hand, he may either have preferred to believe Oufkir's solemn protestations of innocence or feel he can't get rid of the strong man of his regime. At any rate, what is known is that Oufkir and the commandant Dlimi, head of the Moroccan security services, took a plane to Paris, and there is considerable evidence that they were picked up by Lopez and taken to Boucheseiche's villa, together with another police official attached to the Embassy in Paris. Later all the Moroccans, together with Boucheseiche, left France; and, despite an international warrant, Boucheseiche remains untraceable.

De Gaulle's initial reaction was one of genuine fury that a minister of a friendly country should organise a kidnapping in the heart of Paris. He broke diplomatic protocol by telling his Ambassador to deliver a personal message to Ben Barka's mother. The suggestion of involvement by French police officers and the reminder that one of the French services had captured the OAS Colonel Argoud in Germany have somewhat blunted French investigations. Meanwhile, in Morocco, the UNFP press has finally given up publishing, as their papers were inevitably seized. The current atmosphere of repression has effectually ended any hopes of UNFP co-operation in a new government. Ben Barka's disappearance - and probable murder - may have inaugurated a new period of violence. Will King Hassan find a way to dissociate himself from his over-zealous minister?