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Murder in the Metro

MYSTERIOUS DEATH LEADS TO SCHOLARLY WORK ON GENDER AND FASCISM IN 1937 FRANCE

BY ANNETTE FINLEY-CROSWHITE AND GAYLE K. BRUNELLE

A PERFECT CRIME

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n the 16th of May, 1937, at around 6 p.m., a striking, 29-year-old Italian woman wearing a finely tailored green suit, white hat and gloves left a suburban Paris *bal musette*, or dance hall, and walked quickly toward a bus stop.

Approximately 24 minutes later, she stepped off the bus and entered a metro station where she boarded a first-class car bound for central Paris. Although the subway platform and the accompanying second-class cars were filled with Pentecost Sunday holiday-makers who had spent the afternoon at the Parc de Vincennes, Laetitia Nourrissat Toureaux sat alone in her first-class car. The train departed at 6:26 p.m., and 45 seconds later arrived at the Porte Dorée station where six passengers entered the first-class car and beheld a shocking sight. In front of their eyes, the woman in the green suit fell forward out of her seat, revealing a 9-inch dagger buried in her neck.



Laetitia Toureaux, pictured on the cover of the May 27, 1937, *Détective* magazine.

Metro authorities immediately summoned the Paris police and emergency personnel, but Laetitia Toureaux died before she ever reached the Saint-Antoine Hospital and without ever naming her assailant. The judicial section of the Paris police force, known as the *Sûreté Nationale*, immediately launched an inquiry into the murder. Over the next 12 months they interviewed more than 800 people who either

knew Toureaux or who had been at the dance hall, bus stop or subway platform with her on the day of her death. The police never found a single witness to the crime, however, and eventually shelved the investigation. To this day, the murder of Laetitia Toureaux remains officially unsolved, a seemingly “perfect crime.”

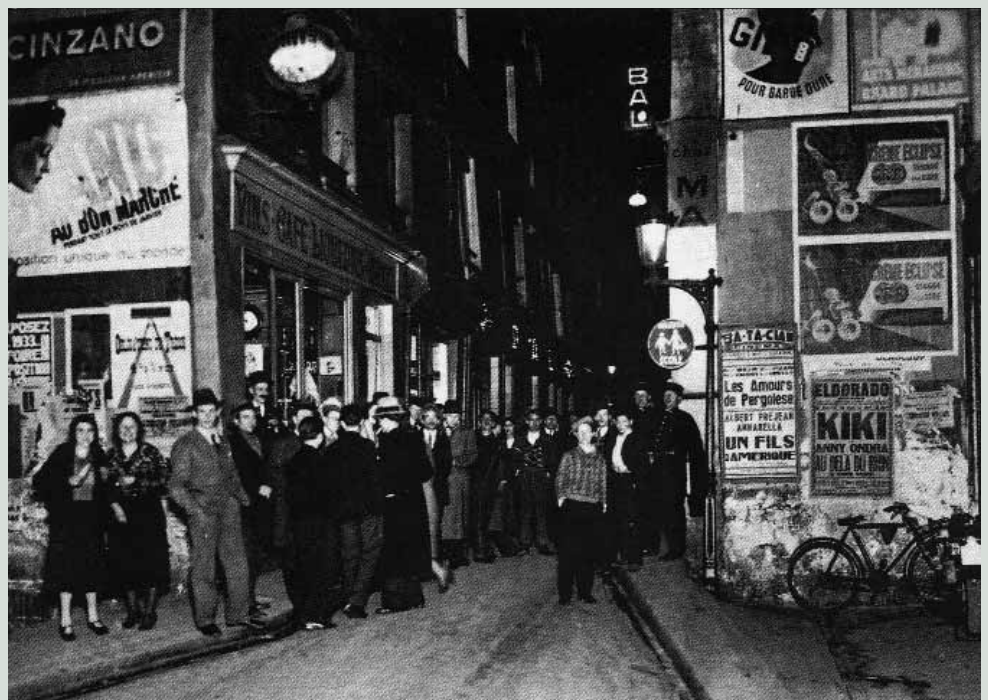
The paradox of Toureaux’s murder is that by mid-January of 1938 the Paris police and even the journalists, who were just as determined to solve the mystery of her death, had little doubt about who had killed her. The murder was connected to the assassinations of three prominent figures: the Russian economist Dimitri Navachine, stabbed to death in the Bois-de-Boulogne on Jan. 26, 1937; and the Italian antifascist exiles Carlo and Nello Rosselli, gunned down on a road in Normandy on June 9, 1937. Police eventually traced all three assassination cases to an extreme right-wing organization called the *Comité Secret d’Action Révolutionnaire* (CSAR) and popularly dubbed the “Cagoule,” or “hooded ones,” because of their penchant for donning hoods when they needed to hide their identities. The Cagoule favored violence and planned a paramilitary coup to oust the socialist “Popular Front” government of the late 1930s before installing a military-style dictatorship in preparation for the return of the French monarchy.

CSAR leadership included former army and naval officers, engineers, doctors and industrialists, many of whom belonged to some of the most distin-

guished families in France. The organization was well-funded by the heads of major companies like Michelin, L’Oréal and Lesieur Oil and had some support within the French armed forces. The Cagoule had no true ideology but expounded a vehement nationalist, anti-communist, anti-socialist, anti-democratic and anti-Semitic stance. During the period 1936-37, the Cagoule committed a number of serious crimes that included two bombings in Paris, at least seven murders and the destruction of several airplanes bound for anti-Franco forces in Spain. They incited public riots and on more than one occasion attempted the assassination of the socialist leader and Popular Front prime minister, Léon Blum. In Paris, members of the Cagoule also formed militias, amassed huge stockpiles of weapons, trained terrorists, built underground prisons, sought support from Mussolini and ran guns in Belgium, Switzerland and Italy. Cagoulard cells also existed in the French provinces.

The French police exposed the CSAR on the night of Nov. 15, 1937. Several of those arrested claimed knowledge of Toureaux’s murder and provided testimony about her assassination. Additional circumstantial evidence also pointed to her involvement with the Cagoule. Apparently, she was murdered because she had infiltrated the Cagoule as an undercover agent. When the Cagoulard leadership discovered her betrayal, they had her executed. But if the police suspected this, why was Laetitia Toureaux’s murder never solved?

The CSAR was a clandestine operation with a strict code of secrecy. Its right-wing orientation arose out of hostility toward the Socialist government of Léon Blum during a time of rising unemployment, massive labor unrest and gen-



Rue des Vertus, the street which ran in front of L’As du Cœur, a *bal musette* where Latitia worked.

eral post-World War I malaise. Its leader, Eugène Deloncle, boasted that by 1937, 12,000 men in Paris had joined the Cagoule and 120,000 belonged to the organization in the provinces. At most, the Cagoule probably consisted of fewer than 200 known affiliates who had some sense of the true Cagoulard structure and mission, and anywhere from a few hundred to several thousand who were tied to the CSAR through other organizations or associations. Most believed they had joined an auto-defense organization meant to spring into action in the event of a communist uprising, a misconception the Cagoule's leaders actively fostered. Recruits joined seven-man cells linked by vertical ties to units, battalions, regiments, brigades and divisions. There were no horizontal ties in the organizational structure, however, so that no relationship existed between cells. In the end, the police arrested only 71 members of the Cagoule in 1937-38. Those imprisoned were eventually released in 1939 when France mobilized for war. The case against the CSAR did not come to trial until 1948. By then many of those charged were distinguished war veterans. Most had found important places in the Vichy regime and/or ended the war as part of the French Resistance. Few were punished for their prewar crimes, and in the rush for postwar reconciliation in France, the murder of Laetitia Toureaux was largely forgotten.



Eugène Deloncle, founder of Cagoule

The Cagoule leadership were simply too important to punish for the death of an Italian immigrant of questionable reputation. A case in point involves the late French President François Mitterand, who never belonged to the Cagoule, but developed close ties in his youth to many in its ranks. His sister had a prewar love affair with one of the most notorious of the Cagoulards, Jean-Marie Bouvyer, a man who participated in the murder of the Rosselli brothers, worked for the Vichy commission that deported some 300,000 French Jews to Auschwitz and lived comfortably after the war in Paraguay. Bouvyer's mother, a German collaborator, was the godmother to Mitterand's own son, and Mitterand's brother married a niece of Eugène Deloncle, the Cagoule's mastermind. Mitterand steadfastly refused to discuss his Cagoulard ties during his long presidency, but he clearly knew of the Cagoule's prewar crimes and chose to ignore them. Laetitia Toureaux's story, therefore, forms part of the larger French refusal to come to terms with the pre-World War II era when

many French sympathized with extreme right-wing politics, fascism and anti-Semitism. Indeed, it can be argued that Vichy France was the fulfillment of right-wing agendas.

By retracing Toureaux's life and death in a historical monograph, we intend not only to tell a good story and solve a murder, but also juxtapose the worlds of working-class immigrant culture and upper-class French society in order to craft a portrait of French politics and culture in the 1930s. Toureaux's story thus becomes the lens through which we view French society during a turbulent time when many in France flirted dangerously close with fascism.

Who Was Laetitia Toureaux?

The morning after the murder, "Le Crime du Métro" made sizzling front-page copy in all the papers as Parisians awoke to the shocking news that a beautiful young woman was brutally killed on a subway train. Paris was abuzz with curiosity about the crime and its victim. The doctor who performed the autopsy on Toureaux's body theorized that the blow that killed her had severed her jugular vein so perfectly that only a professional assassin could have done it. But what did this clue indicate about Toureaux's background and lifestyle?

In the weeks that followed her demise, the Parisian newspapers and scandal sheets sensationalized the murder and its investigation, little by little uncovering the details of Toureaux's unconventional life and offering hypotheses on her untimely death. In the first few days after the murder, the journalists and the Parisian public viewed Toureaux as an innocent, an ingénue perhaps, but a respectable, recently widowed immigrant who was a victim of cruel fate. Five days after the murder, however, public opinion turned against her. Exposed as an ambitious social climber with a taste for money and adventure, her marriage to the late Jules Toureaux was revealed to be a clandestine relationship. His scandalized bourgeois family only learned of the union on his deathbed and unsurprisingly severed all legal ties with his working-class wife. Toureaux's lifestyle also had been unsavory, for like many Italians living in France, she frequented *bals musette*, often located in the most sordid neighborhoods of Paris where pimps and prostitutes solicited customers. Toureaux lived a mysterious and exciting life and was known to acquaintances by another name, "Yolande." The police learned that she had sexual encounters with men in hotels and public parks, but they never uncovered any evidence that she charged for sex. Faithful to her husband during their six-year secret marriage, she took a series of lovers from her milieu after his death in 1934.

Even more intriguing, Toureaux not only worked in a

glue factory by day and a *bal musette* by night, she also gained intermittent employment as a sometime “mouche,” or informant, with a detective agency in central Paris called Agence Rouff, where she specialized in surveillance and message delivery. Much of her detective work was done in the *bal musette*. Her beauty was her greatest asset since her good looks gave her entry into many places and access to people she was expected to watch. Through her employer, Georges Rouffinac, it appears that she began working unofficially for the investigative division of the Paris police and in this capacity infiltrated the Cagoule. Late in his life, her former lover and Cagoule member, Gabriel Jeantet, told a reporter that she had been something of a double agent in the employ of Mussolini, but no documentation to this effect has ever been found.

So Why Was Laetitia Killed?

Laetitia Toureaux loved to dance, and as a dancer she met many young army officers who were attracted to right-wing politics. It appears that sometime in 1936, Laetitia, now known as “Yolande” and working for the police to infiltrate illegal, right-wing political groups, became the lover of Jeantet, the Cagoule’s arms smuggling expert. Jeantet ran a garage near Montmartre and commanded a fleet of cars he used to smuggle arms from Geneva to Paris. By the spring of 1937, the Cagoule began to suspect Toureaux of deceit and set a trap for her. News of an upcoming arms run was leaked to her, but when the car was stopped at the Swiss border, it was empty. The ruse cost Toureaux her life. The Cagoule leadership met on May 10, 1937, and determined her fate. In all probability, the group’s most notorious assassin, Jean Filliol, was ordered to kill her. Filliol proceeded to pull off the perfect crime and fled to Spain before World War II broke out. He finished his life a rich man near San Sebastian.



Jean Filliol, Laetitia Toureaux’s alleged murderer



Scene of the Cagoule bombing of Sept. 11, 1937

Why Tell Laetitia Toureaux’s Story Now?


Laetitia Toureaux’s story is both timely and compelling. A 500-page summary of the investigation compiled by the police a few months after her death paints a fascinating picture of one woman’s struggle to achieve bourgeois respectability in a world that denied upward mobility to people of her sex, class and ethnicity. Her murder is also intertwined with the history of French fascism. The Cagoule leaders were not street thugs but highly educated nationalists who used terrorism, particularly the bombing of two sites in the wealthy 16th district of Paris – ironically, on Sept. 11, 1937 – as a means of sending a message to the French public. On this particular 9/11, they hoped to fool the public into believing that a communist putsch was imminent and thereby hasten the fall of the Third Republic. Historians, however, seldom give more than summary attention to the Cagoule’s prewar aims. Ultimately the Cagoule failed to bring about regime change and install an ultraconservative state. Even so, their use of violence as a means of promoting disorder in 1937 has never been fully examined. A reassessment of the CSAR could aid understanding of France’s fall in 1940. At the very least, such a study provides insight into how terrorist cells operate, incite fear, and as Americans know only too well, change history.

And in the end, what do we make of Laetitia Toureaux, the woman who gives us access to those violent times? Reconstructing her life was no easy task. The files concerning her murder were sealed by the French government for 101 years and are not due to be released until 2038. We acquired legal derogations and gained access to many of these files but only after signing documents in which we promised never to compromise the names of leading French families. In many instances, files we sought vanished “without explanation.” A five-year search finally turned up the police archives that we

were repeatedly told did not exist. More than one French archivist warned us not to pursue this research.

In 1997 we set out to find Toureaux’s grave. There in the stillness of a cemetery on the outskirts of Paris, we vowed to this woman to tell her story. Laetitia “Yolande” Toureaux was no heroine, but she embodied many of the complexities of interwar French society. In 2002 the lease expired on her grave plot, and her body was exhumed and cremated. In some sense, we believe, the publication of our book will reanimate and validate her existence.

In 1997 Annette Finley-Croswhite, associate professor and dean of graduate studies in the College of Arts and Letters, happened onto two or three sentences in a Paris travel guide about a 1937 unsolved murder in the capital city’s subway. That reading would lead to an eight-year project that is now drawing to an end. Finley-Croswhite and fellow researcher Gayle Brunelle, whom she had met in graduate school at Emory University and who now teaches at California State University, Fullerton, agreed that the story was too good to pass up. Although both are French historians whose specialty is the 16th century, they “retooled” themselves to write about this fascinating piece of history from the 20th century. They published a major article in the journal *French Cultural Studies*, “Murder in the Metro,” and have spoken about it at several conferences. After years of research, they have produced a manuscript, titled “Laetitia Toureaux and the Cagoule: Murder, Gender, and Fascism in 1937 France.” The subject of the scholarly work remains highly controversial, and many people in France would prefer that the story be forgotten. As dedicated historians and researchers, however, Finley-Croswhite and Brunelle couldn’t let that happen.



To this day, the murder of Laetitia Toureaux remains officially unsolved, a seemingly “perfect crime.”

—Annette Finley-Croswhite