



Analysis

The Tarnac affair: the shipwreck of the French ‘counter-terrorism struggle’

Franck Richard
Originally published in *El Salto*¹

May 2018

Ten years after the ‘Tarnac affair’ began with accusations of terrorism against a group of people from a libertarian community, the key individuals in the case, subsequently accused of sabotaging railway lines, have been cleared of all charges. The process has demonstrated a set-up designed to create an internal enemy.

Police raid on Tarnac

On 11 November 2008, the inhabitants of the village of Tarnac, situated in the plateau of Millevaches in Corrèze, France, were woken up by the arrival of hundreds of police officers. They had come to detain 15 people that lived in one of the farms. They accused these men and women, who were part of a libertarian community, of having sabotaged the overhead power lines of the railways in various *départements* during the night between 7 and 8 November 2008. The sabotage had caused numerous interruptions in the rail network between Paris, Strasbourg and Lille.

The television news opened that day with the face of the man who would be presented as the leader of the community, Julien Coupat, and the programmes centred on his unusual profile. This doctor’s son, with a brilliant education, had lived in one of the most luxurious neighbourhoods of the French capital. The authorities suspected that he was the author of *L’insurrection qui vient* (‘The Coming Insurrection’), a political essay with situationist accents that called for sabotage operations to paralyse the country and its productive apparatus. He was quickly presented as the charismatic guru of a sect with the evocative name of ‘The Invisible Committee’.

Secret service surveillance

Julien Coupat and his girlfriend, Yildune Lévy, had for a long time been under the surveillance of the General Directorate for Internal Security (DGSI, *Direction générale de la sécurité*

¹ The original article, in Spanish: Franck Richard, ‘Caso Tarnac: el naufragio de la ‘lucha antiterrorista’ francesa’, *El Salto*, 17 April 2018, <https://www.elsaltodiario.com/francia/caso-tarnac-naufragio-lucha-antiterrorista-francesa>

intérieure), after the receipt of a report from the FBI that the two had been seen in New York with anarchists from the United States who were considered dangerous.²

For a number of months, they were followed continually by plainclothes police officers, on occasion in bizarre situations, such as the day when they encountered a woman in a petrol station who was talking into a microphone in the neck of her parka jacket.

Some days before their detention, Coupat and Lévy were seen by the police just a few kilometres from one of the infrastructures that would later be damaged, situated in the city of Dhuisy, in Seine-et-Marne. Although the police could not confirm having seen them place scrap metal on the railway's overhead power lines, they did say that they had seen them leave by car from a zone nearby. Three days later, a sizeable group of police officers – accompanied by numerous journalists – came to detain them for forming part of an “association of wrongdoers with a terrorist character”.

Michèle Alliot-Marie, interior minister of the Sarkozy government, was pleased with the capture of dangerous terrorists belonging to the “anarcho-autonomous movement”.³ The anti-terrorist judge Thierry Fragnoli said in a press conference that the group was on the verge of committing murder for political reasons. France was scared.

Suspicious documents

However, record D104 drew everybody's attention. This is the key document of the Tarnac case, that which describes the surveillance of Coupat and Lévy the night of the sabotage, and it was the numerous inconsistencies within the document's contents that finally gave rise to suspicion. In the first place, there were errors regarding the names of the streets – the same errors that can be found in a famous piece of cartographic software.⁴ Then there were the 26 kilometres covered in less than 10 minutes, an average speed of 159 kilometres per hour along small, rural roads. And finally, the strange timetable of brigadier Stéphane X, who was taking part in the surveillance operation and at the same time was on the premises of the DGSI located in the west of Paris. Numerous clues indicated that the police testimony had been given after the railway lines had been damaged.

Although the accused presented a complaint in November in 2011 in Nanterre over the falsification of documents and for the use of false documents, the investigation continued accumulating errors and an examination of the exonerating factors – such as Yildune Lévy's withdrawal of money in the centre of Paris at the moment of the acts of sabotage – was denied.⁵

² Much of this information was allegedly gathered by exposed British police spy Mark Kennedy. See: Chris Jones, 'Secrets and lies: undercover police operations raise more questions than answers', *Statewatch Journal*, vol 23 no 2, August 2013, <http://database.statewatch.org/article.asp?aid=33253>

³ Note: this term was apparently coined by Alliot-Marie herself, and forms part of a history of political constructs that includes 'Euro-anarchists', which seems to have originally been produced in Italy and subsequently took hold amongst the German authorities. See: Matthias Monroy, 'Using false documents against "Euro-anarchists": the exchange of Anglo-German undercover police highlights controversial police operations', *Statewatch Journal*, vol 21 no 2, April-June 2011, <http://database.statewatch.org/article.asp?aid=31641>

⁴ Note: this is presumably a reference to Google Maps.

⁵ Note: in November 2012 lawyers acting on behalf of Yildune Lévy also began court proceedings demanding that the French Central Directorate of Interior Intelligence (DCRI, akin to UK's MI5) reveal the contents of a dossier on which the criminal charges against her and others in the Tarnac case

There was also a witness who declared he had heard Julien Coupat call for armed insurrection during political meetings in Tarnac. This witness confessed later to a French television channel that he had invented the claim under the pressure of threats from the police.

But the most disturbing element is the German clue that was openly ignored by the judicial system. On 10 November 2008, a German environmentalist group claimed responsibility for nine acts of sabotage on high speed and other railway lines in Germany. In a document entitled *In Erinnerung an Sebastien* ('In memory of Sebastian'), the members of this group declared that they had carried out these actions in revenge for the loss of Sébastien Briat, a 24-year-old from France who died in 2004⁶ during an action to block a 'castor' train that undertook the annual transport of nuclear waste from The Hague to Gorleben⁷ in the north of Germany: "With incendiary devices and metal brackets we marked our resistance last night, because we are fed up... Tired of the speeches of elected representatives and of the industry and government officials about the safety of the nuclear waste."

The allegations collapse

It would become increasingly difficult for the police to place upon Coupat the profile of a dangerous terrorist. An increasing number of journalists questioned the seriousness of the investigation and pointed towards the shadowy role of government advisors that were developing a security policy made-to-measure for President Sarkozy.

In the first place there was Alain Bauer, an expert in criminology who had brought over 'ultrasecurity' policies from the United States, inspired by the famous 'broken windows theory' of James Q. Wilson. There was also Bernard Squarcini, a personal friend of the president and director of the DGSI, which had just completed the fusion of the *Renseignements Généraux* (General Information Services), responsible for tracking political parties' militants, and the *Direction de la Surveillance du Territoire* (DST, Directorate of Territorial Surveillance), dealing with counter-espionage. The Tarnac case would be the first undertaking for this new organ, used to sell President Sarkozy's new security policy.

Eventually, the house of cards collapsed under the weight of its own improbabilities. On 7 August 2015 the investigating judge, Jeanne Duvé, rejected the label of terrorism and converted the Tarnac case into a simple penal accusation. Between a rock and a hard place, between the humiliation of having to admit its own errors and the desire of some magistrates to elude political authority, the judicial institution would eventually give the fatal blow to the investigation.

On 12 April, Corinne Goetzmann, president of the 14th Chamber of the Criminal Court of Paris, issued a long and reasoned sentence which deflated the case and declared that "the hearing has made it possible to understand that the label of 'Tarnac group' was a fiction." Jérémie

were based. It was alleged that the contents of the dossier were largely based on information compiled by Mark Kennedy. See: Chris Jones, 'Secrets and lies: undercover police operations raise more questions than answers', *Statewatch Journal*, vol 23 no 2, August 2013, <http://database.statewatch.org/article.asp?aid=33253>

⁶ See: 'France: Anti-nuclear protester dies during nuclear transport', *Statewatch Bulletin*, vol 14 no 6, November-December 2004, <http://database.statewatch.org/article.asp?aid=26252>

⁷ Protests against the 'nuclear transports' have been consistent since 1977, when Gorleben was designated as a storage site for nuclear waste. See: Kees Hudig, 'Policing popular mass protests: the transport of nuclear waste at Goleben, Germany', *Statewatch Journal*, vol 21 no 1, January-March 2011, <http://database.statewatch.org/article.asp?aid=30567>

Assous, Coupat's lawyer, said: "It's a humiliation for the antiterrorist services of the time." In her judgement, Goetzmann "recalled that French law is governed by a series of principles which you cannot disobey, even if you are an agent of the counter-terrorism department."⁸

Upon leaving the court, Yildune Lévy declared: "For me, if there is something that we should hold onto, it's that we must never surrender ourselves, we must never stop struggling against all the grinding machines, from the counter-terrorism system to the JCBs in Notre-Dame-des-Landes."⁹

Statewatch does not have a corporate view, nor does it seek to create one, the views expressed are those of the author. Statewatch is not responsible for the content of external websites and inclusion of a link does not constitute an endorsement.

⁸ Note: the charges of terrorism against Coupat and Lévy were dropped, as were charges of sabotage and membership of any kind of group. The two were found guilty of refusing to consent to a DNA test, but no punishment was handed down against them. In total, of eight defendants (five men and three women between the ages of 31 and 43) "the rest were also cleared of belonging to a subversive group. But one was convicted of handling stolen goods and attempting to falsify administrative documents." See: Leftwing 'anarchist terror cell' is fiction, French judges rule, The Guardian, 13 April 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/13/tarnac-nine-leftwing-anarchist-terror-cell-fiction-france>

⁹ Note: this is a reference to the ongoing destruction of the ZAD in Notre-Dame-des-Landes, a site earmarked for the construction of the airport for a decade has been occupied by hundreds of people who made it their home. ZAD has two meanings: *zone d'aménagement différée* (zone for future development) officially and *zone à défendre* (zone to defend) to those living there and their supporters. See: 'Thousands of police deployed to destroy ten-year-old land occupation in France', *Statewatch News Online*, 12 April 2018, <http://www.statewatch.org/news/2018/apr/fr-zad-clearance.htm>



Statewatch is a non-profit-making voluntary group founded in 1991. It is comprised of lawyers, academics, journalists, researchers and community activists. Its European network of contributors is drawn from 18 countries. Statewatch encourages the publication of investigative journalism and critical research in Europe the fields of the state, justice and home affairs, civil liberties, accountability and openness.

One of Statewatch's primary purposes is to provide a service for civil society to encourage informed discussion and debate - through the provision of news, features and analyses backed up by full-text documentation so that people can access for themselves primary sources and come to their own conclusions.

Statewatch is the research and education arm of a UK registered charity and is funded by grant-making trusts and donations from individuals.

Web: www.statewatch.org | Email: office@statewatch.org | Phone: (00 44) 203 691 5227

Post: c/o MDR, 88 Fleet Street, London EC4Y 1DH

Charity number: 1154784 | Company number: 08480724
Registered office: 2-6 Cannon Street, London, EC4M 6YH