
Domestic Cold War Casualties

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In 1981 I read an article by Noam Chomsky that I have never forgotten. The article was published in the British *Guardian*, 15 June 1981. The title tells it all: 'The cold war is a device by which superpowers control their own domains. That is why it will continue'. There we read:

There are four separate aspects of United States foreign policy that one can always identify. ... fourthly, there is another class of victim – the domestic population. One significant feature of foreign policy is how it is constructed to deal with the problems posed by the domestic population, particularly if it is insufficiently apathetic or obedient.

Coincidentally, I was then researching the massive post-1945 political and propaganda assault by reactionary and corporate forces against those wanting a more egalitarian future. The New Deal was now the enemy to be de-legitimized. A broader and stronger wage labor, unionization belatedly legitimized by the 1935 Wagner Act, presented a gigantic threat to be brought to heel. Personnel with progressive politics in locations of potential influence – the bureaucracy, educational institutions, the arts – had to be castrated.

And thus it came to pass. The dangerous forces and programs were strategically tainted with association with the great Satan that was 'communism'. We Westerners were kept well informed on the domestic hell behind the Iron Curtain – there one conformed to the letter or one was excommunicated (or sometimes exterminated).

But the US had its own blanket Loyalty Oath. If unevenly applied, it was comprehensive in scope. The formula was duly exported (along with murderous complementary organizations) to Europe, to the US' backyard in Latin America, to the White Dominions of the British Empire, and to other satrap nations. Inflated mightily from promising beginnings with the 'Red Scare' after World War I, the bogeyman became the bedrock on which US Intelligence, now out of control, is grounded. The era has been endowed by our academic pundits with the benign moniker of

Pax Americana.

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But bursting into the limelight in France is Exhibit A for the prosecution.

In late 2012 appeared a documentary that was shown on national television in May 2013. 'L'Honneur des gueules noires' (The black throats' honor), by Jean-Luc Raynaud. Then in March 2014 appeared a book by Dominique Simonnot, court columnist for *Le Canard Enchaîné* – *Plus Noir dans la Nuit* (Darker at night).

The subject is the national coal miners' strike in late 1948. This could be straight out of Balzac, Hugo, Zola, but it's straight out of history. But first the background.

The miners inhabited a distinct world. Before World War II, coal miners lived in more than a company town, rather a companies' region with Nord/Pas-de-Calais representative. A ruthless hierarchy prevailed, ameliorated by the structures (albeit rigorously policed) of a corporate paternalism. After Liberation, a wave of nationalizations included coal – the private companies were subsumed within a public giant, Charbonnages de France. But the hierarchy of the 'Coal Barons' remained in place.

The miners were then heroes. They had struck in May 1941 under the German Occupation, for 'bread and liberty' and to inhibit French coal fuelling the Nazi war machine. The strike was brutally repressed. Some strikers were executed; 600 people were sent to concentration camps, with few returning. Post-war, Communist Party leader and later Deputy Maurice Thorez had urged in July 1945 to 'roll up your sleeves' to win the battle of coal. In two years, the miners had lifted production to pre-War levels. The miners were accorded a unique 'contract' (*statut*) in June 1946, reflecting their productivity achievements and the murderous conditions of work. The contract included a minimum wage and the institutionalization of the paternalistic structures in place.

Notes Dominique Conil ([Mediapart](#), 3 May), reviewing Simonnot's book:

... the town of Brebis, a decent place and triumph of paternalism. At Brebis, one has a cottage (typically small, far from the engineers' fine residences, but that one has for the long term), one has free heating (at least from coal), one has the nursery, a doctor, the hospital for childbirth, the garden for the necessary vegetables, a community hall. A free library and public school. A decent street market, an intense social life.

But material deprivation remained a permanent threat amongst the miners and inflation was ramping up living costs. The price of basic commodities – bread, milk, meat, wine, cigs – had doubled on average in a year.

In September 1947 the (Socialist) Industry Minister, Robert Lacoste unilaterally and illegally broke the miners' contract, eliminating structures that inhibited downward pressure on wages. In September 1948, Lacoste again unilaterally and illegally attacked the miners' contract, decreeing a 10% reduction in the mining workforce, on-the-spot sackings for laxity, and the exclusion of union representatives from deliberations, handing to employers the sole right to determine life and death decisions regarding pit safety and the medical conditions of miners in threat of silicosis.

On 24 September the radical confederation CGT recommended rolling localized stoppages in protest. The miners' union, the Fédération nationale du sous-sol, more militant, organized a secret ballot, with 84% (of 260,000) supporting a national strike. Union leaders met with Lacoste, to no effect.

On the eve of the strike, (Socialist) Interior Minister Jules Moch brought in the Compagnies Républicaines de Sécurité (c/f the US National Guards), formed in 1944, and then the army (with tanks and heavy artillery). Troops were brought back from Morocco and Germany.

Thus the strike on the 4th October – involving 340,000 miners. The coal supply stops, but coal was 'the bread of industry'. Electricity production plummets, and winter is approaching.

On the 7th, a miner in Lorraine was bashed to death with rifle butts by CRS personnel. The FNSS upped the ante, but Moch upped the brutal repression. There was much solidarity, including widely from abroad. Miners' children in

their thousands were farmed out across France to the care of sympathetic households. The CIO's (ex-miner) John Lewis reputedly wrote to President Truman to 'call for the French government to abandon its methods worthy of a totalitarian state and to cease making war against its miners at the expense of the American taxpayers'.

It was an unequal battle. On 19th November, the CRS invaded the camps in Lorraine holding North African miners, sacked their barracks and forced them into the pits. Miners began dribbling back through November, with the strike officially called off on 29th November.

The miners' official status would change overnight from heroes to traitors. Six miners were killed, many wounded. 3,000 were arrested and 1300 imprisoned (half from Nord/Pas-de-Calais) and fined impossible sums by partisan magistrates. The miners were found guilty of 'impeding the freedom to work', ignoring the miners' right to strike embedded in both the 1946 Constitution and the *statut*. Striking miners taken back were forced into more dangerous jobs, with those with existing ailments condemned to certain death.

3,000 miners (of which half from Nord/Pas-de-Calais) were sacked. Designated militants were turned out of their homes, with all that that entailed. No unemployment relief. They were then blacklisted, with Charbonnages agents policing their exclusion from any job. Their rank from army and Resistance service was arbitrarily reduced. They had become non-persons. There was another purge in 1952. The blacklist was even extended to the next generation. The blacklisted and their families were thus condemned to immense hardship, some for a lifetime.

This a Cold War story. The Cold War blew up in 1947. The formulation and implementation of the Marshall Plan cemented the polarization. The significant French Communist Party was in an invidious position. Whatever Moscow wanted, or whatever the PCF and communist workers (ditto in Italy) wanted for themselves, the US with the resources was henceforth calling the shots. And the US wanted French (and Italian) communists emasculated.

Communist Party Ministers, an integral part of the victorious coalition now assertively engaged in Post-War reconstruction, were expelled from the Ramadier government in May 1947. It starts innocently enough, but the drift is almost inevitable. There is a strike at Renault in late April for a marginal wage increase. The Communist Deputies support it, the Communist Ministers are compromised. Out they have to go.

Lacoste and Moch, as with Léon Blum, were members of the SFIO that had been formed from those declining to join the Comintern in 1920. Lacoste and Moch were both active in the Resistance and collaborators with de Gaulle after the Liberation. Now they were implacably on the side of bourgeois order. The SFIO refined itself as a distinct third force between the Right and the Communists (joined by the Christian Democrat MRP to its Right), explicitly pro-Atlanticist and repudiating the post-War collaboration.

Strikes continued intermittently throughout 1947, including the October-November miners' strike, thanks to Lacoste's September decree. The high point is the end-of-year wharf strike, centred on war-torn and militant Marseille. The scene shifts to the Assembly where Moch is attempting to have passed a law to readily raise 80,000 troops as strike-breakers. Moch cites instances of sabotage as justification.

Simonnot reproduces an extraordinary exchange in the Assembly, 29 November, between the Communist Deputies (amongst whom multiple war veterans) and the 'forces of order' led by then Prime Minister, Christian Democrat Robert Schuman (later to be designated 'the father of Europe' and of NATO). Schuman, born in Lorraine under German rule, is mercilessly harangued as a Boche. Deputy Ambroise Croizat (PCF), paraphrasing the Archbishop of Paris, captures the essence: 'How much will it cost? The workers are hungry. It's a disgrace. Today we witness a furious assault by those who want to impose on the shoulders of the disinherited the immense burden of the War and of the reconstruction of France'.

Moch gets his troops. He also proceeds to cleanse the CRS of a culture hostile to worker repression. He is ready for October 1948.

But Moch has some help. From the unlikely source of Alfred McCoy's *The Politics of Heroin* we learn that the militant Marseille dockers, along with local Communist bureaucrats, are subject to assault from a criminal underworld. Marseille is crucial for Marshall Plan logistics (and next, for heroin). And so the Americans are in there, financing gangsters (as in Italy) to obliterate the home-grown opposition. The CIA was created in September 1947, and Marseille was one of its first jobs.

American money also simultaneously financed a split in the Communist-Socialist CGT, hence the creation of the

accommodating and well-financed 'apolitical' splinter union Force ouvrière.

Moch, with spies everywhere, loose with the truth, spearheaded a fanatical fear campaign within a compliant media. He accuses the miner strikers of being directed from Moscow, prelude to an insurrection. The Communists, he claimed, are attempting to replicate the 'coup de Prague', when Czech Communists appropriated power in February 1948. The local newspaper, *La Voix du Nord* (it's still going, albeit now sympathetic), called on the Socialist government to 'prevent the perpetration of such crimes against humanity that serves the interests of Soviet Russia before that of the lives of France's little children'.

Yet the 1948 strike was driven by material considerations prevailing in France and by provocations from the Socialist-led Government. In late October, after the death of another miner, the Communist Deputy Gabriel Roucaute, responding to lies from Lacoste regarding miners' wages, cited a Gard mining village priest: 'People say that there is politics in this strike, but there is above all destitution! All the troops in the world cannot silence the cry of destitution'. As another contemporary put it: 'The Cominform's best recruiting agent is the high price of butter'.

Moch had declared war on those seeking a living wage and the rule of law went out the window. In 2009, the non-person Norbert Gilmez claimed:

In reality, it was state terrorism, instigated by Jules Moch, that the miners had faced. In truth ... all the crimes for which they have been condemned were only acts of resistance against state terrorism.

In compensation for its accommodation to US imperial designs in Western Europe, the SFIO (with the MRP) pursued *la gloire de la France* via a resurgent neo-colonialism. Lacoste, as key Minister in late 1950s governments, became one of the most virile defenders of French control in Algeria and of the concomitant repression of liberation forces. The strategy would end in the comprehensive destruction of the SFIO's legitimacy. Rough justice.

Moch's last book is titled *Le communisme, jamais!* (Communism, never!, 1978). Flailing the hierarchical character of Western Communist Parties and the crimes of the Stalinist USSR, the point of the book is nevertheless to denounce the common program of a French Socialist-Communist alliance after 1972. There is no mention in the book of the post-War period and Moch's personal role in brutal étatist repression of workers expressing their democratic rights.

Decades go by for the non-persons. François Mitterand is elected in 1981 (following the Socialist-Communist alliance). A coterie of 17 miners (or widows), organized by representative victim Georges Carbonnier, imagines that finally the time has arrived when recognition and compensation will be possible. In 1948, Carbonnier was forced out of his house and community with only a handcart of possessions.

But the miners were to be disabused of their optimism. There follows over 20 years of pass the hot potato between Ministers and Ministries. This run-around featured Socialist Party luminaries like Lionel Jospin (in the Prime Minister's office as Party First Secretary, later Prime Minister) and Martine Aubry (in the Social Affairs Ministry, later Minister of Employment and Solidarity under Jospin). No-one will deign to meet them. Thus is entrenched the permanent inaction of the Socialists in the face of this perfidy. Carbonnier and Gilmez collected a fat archive of industrial strength political doublespeak, with telling tidbits cited by Simonnot.

Mitterand himself is indicted. In 1948 he was spokesperson for the Government. Simonnot unearthed paperwork from a Press Conference given by Mitterand on 28 October 1948. She notes that she had to read it multiple times because she could not believe it ([Marianne interview](#), 4 May). Mitterand offers salutations to the armed forces in the face of 'a mass of men armed with tools and iron bars who attack them in force and cause perceptible harm'. Mitterand adds: 'The renewal of these wild attacks obliges the government to decide that, in future, the forces of order, when they will be thus assailed, will be able (after the necessary warnings) to defend themselves'. A commenter on one site noted that his father (a miner at Montceau les Mines in Burgundy) had been sentenced to six months prison following a writ under Mitterand's signature.

Ironically, in 2004 Nicholas Sarkozy, then Finance Minister, gave a miners' delegation a sympathetic hearing. He agreed to the generous sum of €100,600 for each family for the abrogation of their housing and heating rights under the miners' contract. Sarkozy's advisers whittled it down to €14,500 each. Better than nothing. .

In 2005 Carbonnier decides to make a submission to the Haute Autorité de lutte contre les discriminations et pour l'égalité. He meets a radical labor lawyer, Tiennot Grumbach, who brings on board a foursome of committed lawyers. HALDE is sympathetic and in May 2006 recommends mediation – the other party being Charbonnages de France. It comes to nothing, skewered by one Mme Christine Lagarde, then Minister for Commerce & Industry.

Carbonnier dies in August 2006. The activist miners are thinning out. The cudgel is taken up by the unrepentant 86 year-old Norbert Gilmez. Thus the trail moves to the Conseil de prud'hommes (a labor relations tribunal), in October 2007. In the meantime, Charbonnages de France has been dissolved in December 2007, and defence is taken up by the liquidator and the Agence nationale pour la garantie des droits des mineurs, established in 2004 to handle the coal monopoly's ongoing worker entitlements. The defence argues that the miners did not suffer discriminatory sacking because Charbonnages had managerial prerogatives that permitted the firing of employees at will.

The Conseil/tribunal, accorded a title of seeming dignity (albeit *prudhommerie* translates as pomposity), decides against the miners in September 2009 (and subsidiarily in March 2010) on a technicality – the years expired since 1948 have overtaken a 30-year statute of limitations.

Grumbach et. al. take the adverse decision to a court of appeal. Note the passage of the years. In March 2011, the appeal court decides for the miners. The court decreed that there existed a Constitutional right to strike and that the miners' sackings were discriminatory. The court grants the 17 surviving miners and widows/descendants an indemnity of €30,000 each.

The dossier then lands in the lap of President Sarkozy's Finance Minister, Mme Christine Lagarde. Gilmez had earlier submitted a sizeable dossier to Lagarde in December 2009. But Lagarde appeals the appeal court's determination to the Cour de Cassation (c/f the US Supreme Court). In October 2012 the Cour de Cassation overturns the determination on the same technicality as did the Conseil de Prud'hommes.

This is the same Mme Lagarde who is simultaneously facilitating a [massive giveaway](#) from the public purse to the shyster Bernard Tapie. Lagarde appeals against the pro-miners' judgement just before she is moved out of reach into the IMF. These days, the French courts are belatedly but doggedly pursuing Lagarde's role in the Tapie travesty.

On 29 January 2013 in the Assembly, the Nord Deputy Jean-Jacques Candelier noted that Norbert Gilmez turned 92 that day. He despaired that Mme Lagarde had left the country, intolerably, with 'two weights, two measures'. Tapie gets a motza, whereas the miners still lack restitution of their rights and associated indemnities 64 years later. Candelier asked the Minister for Culture & Communication, Mme Aurélie Filippetti, 'what are you doing about this impasse?' Mme Filippetti, member of a government that offered so much promise in May 2012 but has since delivered so much disappointment, opined that the law was tricky but that they were looking into it.

Serendipitously, on [27 February 2013](#), the 24-member Left wing coalition in the Senate (predominantly Communist Party members) brought to the Senate a proposal for a law for amnesty of those criminalized (essentially during the Sarkozy Presidency) for union activism and social protest. The proponents sought to highlight the asymmetry by which a rampant finance capital was deindustrializing France post-haste but that it was the victims rather than the perpetrators who were being penalized, and harshly. The speeches, perspicacious and sober, make for instructive reading.

On this occasion, Senator Dominique Watrin (Communist, Pas-de-Calais) sought to incorporate an amendment that finally granted amnesty and moral rehabilitation to the 1948 miners. A general Amnesty Law had been passed in August 1981, rehabilitating workers in organizations nationalized post-War who had been penalized for dissenting activity. The 1948 miners were excluded from coverage. Confront that by this time, Vichy collaborators and the traitorous Algerian putschists have also been amnestied. The putschists' rank and remunerations were reinstated in 1982 whereas miners whose ranks were downgraded lived a lifetime of humiliation.

Interventions by UMP Senators (notably M. Hugues Portelli) maintained that the miners had been dupes of Moscow and thus their treatment continues to be entirely justified. The Cold War survives on the Right of French politics.

M. Watrin reminded Senators of the then intolerable conditions facing miners. Apart from economic hardship:

Certain among you want to rewrite history in forgetting that, in Nord-Pas-de-Calais alone, of a workforce of 126,500 underground miners, between 1 January 1948 and 1 October 1948, there were 90 killed in the mines, 1974 permanently incapacitated and 3,000 suffering from silicosis, unable to return underground.

Watrin's amendment was accepted, and the proposed Amnesty Law passed, with Green and Socialist support, by a bare majority. But the proposal then goes to the Assembly's Commission des Lois, which rejects the amendment. The Commission's general recommendations for the Law are then debated in the Assembly on 16 May 2013 to a generally hostile audience. The Socialists talk of the unacceptable selective intrusion into the penal code and of maintaining 'balance'. The Right rails about the Law being the thin end of the wedge, a recipe for chaos and a mad revitalization of moribund notions of 'class struggle'. The forces of bourgeois order emerge victorious.

In early 2013, Hollande's Finance Minister, Pierre Moscovici, no bleeding heart, apparently reinstated the appeal court's 2011 indemnisation of €3,000 to the 17 miners and families. Small change really, but symbolically significant.

Tiennot Grumbach, who made it possible, dies in August 2013. At the funeral, Norbert Gilmez tells Simonnot (which ends her book): "I'll keep going. It is well necessary, essential. Until we've had satisfaction. After that, well I'll be able to die happy." The miners and their families remain without acknowledged amnesty and justice.

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Chomsky concluded his 1981 article thus:

The question now is whether people can overcome the attempt to beat the workforce and the poor into a chauvinist mood so as to tolerate the attack being launched against them. I believe that there is a real chance of doing so, which could have a substantial effect not only on foreign policy but on American institutions – something that the peace movement was never able to achieve.

Alas this optimism was dramatically misplaced. The Communist bogey is dead, or rather internalized. The Soviet Union has been upstaged by a new external enemy, even more profitable because phantom-like and renewable – that of Terrorism. The new enemy brings concomitant domestic victims.

The Cold War, thanks to the deathless Neo-Cons, has been resurrected. But the Cold War's early role as a vehicle for the vitiation of domestic forces hostile to the unmediated rule of Capital is no longer necessary. The Cold War achieved a permanent victory to that effect (the wobble to hegemony in the 1960s-70s notwithstanding).

These days, the omnipresent flunkies for the unmediated rule of Capital talk rubbish without bothering to sound plausible. They know that they have the game sown up – in the US, European Union countries from France to Greece, Ukraine soon to be hauled into the fold. Putsches undermine those (Venezuela, etc.) disinclined to conform. The vote has been comprehensively neutered. Protest is in the process of being comprehensively criminalized. Perhaps Fukuyama inadvertently had it right after all. Is it the end of History?