

France's FBI Floundering Amid Criticism

By Bernard Kaplan
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PARIS, July 30—France's counterespionage agency, consciously modeled on the FBI, has, like the latter and the CIA, become a target of public criticism.

Once widely considered to be the best counterspy organization in Western Europe, the *Direction de la Surveillance du Territoire* is under fire for inefficiency, the declining morale of its agents and the suspicion that it has been used illegally against French citizens.

President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, reportedly fed up by the DST's unsatisfactory performance and fearing a political backlash, is understood to be planning a top-to-bottom reevaluation of its operations.

Tipped to head the investigation is Roger Wybot, who founded the DST after World War II—and was subsequently fired by then-President Charles de Gaulle. Among other reasons, De Gaulle thought the DST had become too closely aligned with American intelligence services.

The agency's present troubles began more than a year ago, under the administration of the late President Georges Pompidou, when a group of pseudo-workmen were caught installing telephone taps in the unfinished new offices of *Le Canard Enchaîné*, a weekly paper here famed for being a thorn in the government's side.

Although the authorities adamantly denied involvement, the case was put in the hands of an investigating judge. His probe encountered numerous obstacles and efforts to sidetrack it, but 18 months later it con-

tinues to grind forward. Enough has emerged to indicate convincingly that whoever ordered the telephone tap, the agents who were caught in the act and fled belonged to the DST.

The only legal justification for the DST's involvement would have been a question of national security. The investigation has reportedly uncovered none. This led to a widely held supposition that the real purpose of the abortive tap was to discover the sources for *Le Canard Enchaîné's* frequently damaging political exposes.

Another episode in the affair occurred in June when Henri Canoet, the deputy chief of the DST's subversion section, suffered a mental breakdown in full view, as it were, of the nation.

Canoet, in his early forties and rated one of the agency's best men, stood for five hours shouting incoherently from the balcony of his Paris apartment. Waving a pistol and firing into the air, he denounced the organization for which he had worked for more than a decade. To a throng of onlookers in the street below, including reporters, he shouted, "You want to know the names of the agents who directed the Canard affair? I will tell you—Delbois, Laborde . . ."

Mortified DST officials ascribed his breakdown to overwork and the constant pressure of his job in the subversion section, known to professionals as Subac.

Officially, Subac's responsibility is to keep a close eye on extreme leftist organizations with known foreign contacts. Sources here say that one of its unofficial assignments is to watch journalists who are considered to be "too well-informed." This might indicate why Canoet appeared to know a good deal about the Canard matter.

The DST was established because at the time communism had grown into a power, with Communists or their sympathizers in many key positions.

The government, at that time also under De Gaulle, recognized that Soviet intel-

ligence services would obviously try to exploit this situation. So resources were marshaled to create a highly efficient and airtight counterespionage organization. The model was the FBI, then fresh from its much-publicized World War II counterspy feats.

Like FBI agents, DST men were selectively chosen and inculcated with a belief in their elite status. Like the FBI, movies, books and newspaper stories here in the late 1940s and 1950s built up the DST as a crack, omnipotent body of men. The image was not too far from reality.

The agency had an outstanding record of controlling foreign espionage during the years when France was the military and political headquarters of NATO. In the opinion of professionals, its record was better than Britain's more famous but leaky MI-5.

Then came an event that cast doubt not only on the DST's range of activities but on its competence.

Three veteran DST agents, led by Superintendent Jean Herranz, sought to question a young Latin American allegedly linked to terrorist activities in several European countries. For reasons never satisfactorily explained, they went unarmed and were shot down by the suspect, thought to be a Venezuelan or Colombian named Ilitch Ramirez-Sanchez, code name "Carlos". He escaped. Herranz was gravely wounded and his two subordinates, as well as a Lebanese informer, were killed.

The DST claimed that the killer collaborated with the secret services of several Communist bloc countries. Soon after the killings, three Cuban diplomats sta-

tioned here were expelled. But no further evidence of complicity between the fugitive and Eastern bloc intelligence services was revealed. Some DST critics suspect that the ramifications of the case may have been exaggerated to cover up botching a comparatively minor security operation.

According to Wybot, there is no doubt that "monumental errors have been committed." He ascribes the organization's present malaise to its being "forced into a political role it dislikes and for which it was never intended."

Wybot said that, at the time of the Algerian war, the DST was enlisted to play a police role against the Secret Army Organization, the underground terrorist movement that wanted Algeria to remain a French possession. "After that, the DST progressively lost its special and distinctive role as an organization of experts," Wybot said.

In the process, according to sources, DST units grew out of touch. France's break with NATO also produced difficulties, although cooperation with allied counterespionage organizations did not cease.

Some informants say that these and other handicaps also impeded the DST when in the last 1960s, a new threat emerged: international terrorism. Because of French friendship with the Arab nations, many officials here seemed to assume that France would be immune from operations mounted by Palestinian terrorist groups. By the time it became apparent that this was a forlorn hope, the DST lagged in efforts to penetrate the terrorist milieu.