

French Ex-Spy Says Unit Plotted Murders

By Bernard Kaplan

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PARIS, Oct. 22—During the 1960s the French government operated a high-level "assassination" committee whose task was to pinpoint enemies of the regime for elimination, according to a newly published book by a former senior French secret agent.

In his book "The Committee," ex-agent Philippe Thiraud De Vosjoli also claims that the De Gaulle government systematically opened foreign embassies' diplomatic mail, including that of the United States. On one occasion during an international conference in Cannes in 1961, according to De Vosjoli, a French agent entered the hotel room of U.S. Under Secretary of State George Ball in the middle of the night and rifled it for secret documents.

Although De Vosjoli's book contains many alleged revelations about the inner workings of France's intelligence U services, it is principally a defense of a former colleague, Marcel Leroy-Finville, who was cashiered and imprisoned for his supposed involvement in the kidnap-slaying here of a leftist Moroccan politician, Mehdi Ben Barka, in 1965. The Ben Barka affair erupted into a major scandal of the De Gaulle regime and led to a diplomatic crisis between France and Morocco.

De Vosjoli insists that Leroy-Finville, considered one of the top agents of the French intelligence agency, was actually framed by his own government. The real reason for his official disgrace, he says, was his refusal to obey orders—emanating from the "Committee"—to kill a number of French Algerian

dissidents living in exile in Portugal and Spain just after the Algerian war.

Leroy-Finville, now in retirement in southern France, backed up De Vosjoli's allegations in a telephone conversation. "Nothing has escaped him," Leroy-Finville said. "He followed my personal tragedy closely."

According to the book, the committee consisted of senior intelligence officials and civil servants and was sometimes presided over by the then-prime minister, Georges Pompidou. De Vosjoli implicates Pompidou, later president of France, in the Leroy-Finville case, claiming that the orders to kill the French Algerian exiles came from a senior official in the prime minister's office.

The Committee kept no notes or records, De Vosjoli says. It had a "permanent" list of assassination "objectives," among them Presidents Sekou Toure of Guinea and Habib Bourguiba of Tunisia, both at the time considered antagonists of Charles De Gaulle.

If De Vosjoli is to be believed, one successful target of the committee was the Italian state oil tycoon Enrico Mattei. French agents were responsible for sabotaging Mattei's airplane in 1963 because, according to him, France believed he was seeking to oust French oil interests in Algeria.

The book offers an explanation of why Leroy-Finville was abruptly released from prison after four months and never tried. According to De Vosjoli's account, a group of the accused man's former associates, including himself, sent a warning to De Gaulle and Pompidou that, unless he was freed, they would reveal the existence of the

special committee. He was released less than a week later.

Ironically, in view of the recent allegations of CIA involvement in foreign assassination plots, De Vosjoli in the mid-1950s was the French intelligence service's liaison man with the American agency. He was fired by De Gaulle for becoming too closely identified with the CIA. Some time afterward, he asserted that the French leader's entourage had been infiltrated by a Soviet agent—an allegation that served as the basis for the plot of the bestselling novel "Topaz" by Leon Uris. While De Gaulle was in power, the novel was banned in France.

In the more relaxed atmosphere under President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, a French edition of "The Committee" is expected to be published here shortly. Meanwhile, a French-language version has appeared in Montreal.

De Vosjoli says that the diplomatic pouches of virtually all foreign embassies in Paris were regularly opened by French agents in the Gaullist era. Agents operated from a specially equipped van at Orly Airport, where the incoming and outgoing diplomatic mail was intercepted. They even had the chemistry equipment to reconstitute the fibers of paper that might be inadvertently torn in the process.

American diplomatic mail could not be intercepted in this way because it was invariably carried by State Department couriers. But, says De Vosjoli, French intelligence discovered that copies of most U.S. documents usually were sent to the American embassies in neighboring countries under less stringent security. So, according to De



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De Vosjoli as pictured in Life magazine in 1968.

Vosjoli, Leroy-Finville set up an organization in Morocco to open U.S. diplomatic mail there.

The burglarizing of Ball's hotel room was ordered after a bugging device failed to pick up enough information, according to De Vosjoli. That operation was also conducted under Leroy-Finville. He stood poised as at the hotel's fuse box, ready to plunge it into darkness in case the agent was discovered. He was not,

De Vosjoli says, but was able to photograph the contents of Ball's briefcase and replace them while the under secretary slept.