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THE BONNOT GANG

The first time that the bourgeois press cried “OUTRAGE!” at the Bonnot Gang activity was over the affair in the rue Ordener, a few days before Christmas 1911. It was one of the first motor car raids and is thus a milestone in the march of “progress”.

The Societe General was raided

La Bande à Bonnot

Robberies and Getaways

Ezra Brett Mell



At 8:30 I let Bonnot take over.

We hadn't mutually decided how we were to pull off what we wanted to do - rob a cash collector. We had already observed the collector and timed his arrival at the rue Ordineur but still, it was nine in the morning, right out in the middle of the street, and in a quarter which was rather heavily populated.

At 9:00 exactly we spotted him stepping off the street car as usual, accompanied by someone else assigned to protect him. We don't have a second to lose; the car approaches him, I get out, hand on my revolver. My companion, on the other side of the sidewalk, is a few steps behind me.

Three feet away from the cashier, I take out my revolver, coldly, and shoot him twice; he falls, his accompanying guard runs off; I pick up one sack, my companion takes another.

We get back on the car, some passerby trying to keep us from getting in. We pull out our revolvers, shoot and everyone flees. We take the route to Le Havre, taking lots of detours to keep from getting caught or having to put up a fight (we aren't poorly armed). I have no less than six revolvers on my person. We had about four hundred rounds and had decided to fight to the death if we had to.

We were hungry. I let Bonnot drive. Later, we started running out of gas and decided to leave the car behind, having arrived at the sea and the sandy earth pulling our tires down into it. We throw the license plates away. we got to the trains station to get tickets to Paris and arrive without incident, although the national security agency is close at our feet. I expect they thought the revolution had begun! To think that it was only a slightly serious prank. They are going to see quite a few more before they fall. . .

La “Bande à Bonnot” Robberies and Getaways

Ezra Brett Mell

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February 1911. I had to get out of Brussels as they were looking to accuse me of doing those robberies at Charleroi; I returned to Paris, where I worked on the newspaper ANARCHY, something I worked hard for. I worked hard, just about every day of the week, and as usual, I was a bit thin, so I did a couple of robberies without much real success. I started printing counterfeit bills, but that wasn't too successful and it was just as risky as doing a big job that would bring in more money. I stopped the counterfeiting.

In July, lots of my friends were arrested. I was upset and determined to avenge my position in this criminal society. I left the newspaper and moved to Vincennes with some friends.

While working on the newspaper, we decided to rent a number of rooms so as to better insure our security. We didn't have much money so we robbed some places to get what we needed.

For a time I had been looking for a friend to drive me places, but I couldn't find anyone. I had learned to drive, but not being very skillful at it, I was hesitant to try stealing a car and risk causing our group more trouble than we could handle. It was during this time that I met Bonnot.

It was about December 10, 1911, at night, that we stole a car in Boulogne and proceeded to hide it in a friend's garage. I told him simply that we would be back for it in eight hours or so. I gave him a false name and false address and we left.

We discussed what we had to do. We had two big jobs to do. We were four strong. We drove around Paris for the rest of the night until; 8:30 the next morning. I stayed at the wheel and grew confident in my own abilities to handle the curves in the road, even at high speed. That was good, we really needed two drivers in case one was wounded in the pursuit.

knows no bounds, it is everywhere that I am contented. I don't distinguish between peoples, I seek only mutual understanding, but around me I see only religious types and Christians or deceitful hypocrites. If the workers would think a bit, they would see and understand that between capitalists there are no boundaries, these rapacious wrongdoers organize themselves to oppress others better. It is only now that I am here and it is now that I must live and I shall do just that by any means that science puts at my disposition. I may not live to be terribly old, I will probably be overtaken by the open struggle between me and the society which has better means of winning than I will ever have, but I will defend myself as best I can, to deceitfulness and tricking I will respond in kind, likewise to force, until I am beaten, that is to say, dead.

Around May of 1910, I tried going to the provinces, hoping to leave the country and thereby escape military service, but in July I was put into prison for assault and battery. I got out at the end of August, one month before my class of military trainees was to leave. As soon as I left prison, I got a job with a ditch-digging concern to earn some money; I took the train for the Belgian border, paying for part of the trip, but not all of it - I had to have money to eat on the train. Once in Valenciennes, I got off the train, looked for the exit doors of the station, and was spied on by a policeman, who asked me a few questions, then let me go. I didn't have any money, so I took a job for a week. I committed two robberies and left the country for Belgium. I got to Charleroi about the sixth of October, found a job for a few days, got to know a group of anarchists and in the early part of November I was arrested and then released eight days later (they couldn't prove the charges against me).

I worked a bit, met some people with similar opinions, people who were frank, motivated, with whom I did some robberies. I was twenty and a half years old.

The Economic And Political Implications Of “L'affaire Bonnot”

Back in the days of the First International, Marxists, Anarchists and Blanquists had concerned themselves, among other problems, with the phenomenon in capitalist society of the “criminals of want.” It is a common mistake amongst contemporary bourgeois philosophers that they “idealised the proletariat;” least of all Marx, with his unsentimental approach, would have done such a thing. Some believe that they “idealised the criminal class.” It is with this minor (but important) belief that we are dealing here.

It was generally agreed that it was impossible to condemn crime or a criminal class in terms of the old morality, though it is natural that people found it difficult to shake off acquired terms. To what extent did the three trends of thought regard the underworld as an ally, an enemy, or an embarrassment?

Marx defined in economic, not moral, terms: the laboring class had only its laboring power to sell. If reduced by persistent unemployment, or uprooting from countryside (or country), to the position where it no longer could sell its labor power because of chronic lack of demand, the laboring class was reduced to the LUMPEN-PROLETARIAT. Yet the term implies a moral censure: the “lump” (not to be confused with the same word in English) means “rogue.” Marx's rogue-workers were the “submerged tenth” of Jack London; the “darkest London” of General Booth; the world of Dickens and Mayhew. It does not now exist in this country.

Marx's contemporaries in London were the originals of Mealy Potatoes, the Artful Dodger, Bill and Nancy, Jo the crossing sweeper (who died at the door of the African Mission) ...this was the "whole rabble of Soho" of which he complained to Engels, that gathered to jeer and scream at the evicted Marx family. Indeed, there is a resemblance (not I think heretofore noted) between the Micawbers and the Marxes: the "declassé intellectual" who had (by virtue of his academic failure, racial origin or radical opinions) failed to go on from being a student to becoming a professional man, and had to live with the "submerged tenth" having no labor power to sell, has become a subsequently well known character. In Marx's case, too, while he was waiting for "something to turn up," Frau Marx - like Mrs. Micawber sighing for her family - went out to pawn the family Stuart crested spoons, and was reported by the pawnbroker to the police (who found she was indeed a von Westphalen and her brother was the very Prussian Minister of the Interior whose spies were occasionally keeping watch on her husband). Something similar must have happened to Mrs. Micawber, unknown to Copperfield!

It was, of course, the Micawber attitude that determined Marx in his harsh stricture upon the "lumpen-proletariat:" (Micawber's views upon Uriah Heep are much those of Marx's upon Lassalle's dealings with his Duchess, and their final verdict much the same. Today, of course, this class (more charitably described as the "Lazarus Class" by other sociologists, and pictured as waiting for handouts by the "do-gooders" who have been let loose on them for a matter of three generations) does not really exist. Crime in London is like any other form of business. But the Marxian attitude lingers in a contempt for the poorer strands of the population and the more transitory-natured occupations.

I learned, the more I understood about life. I spent time with anarchists, I understood their theories and became a fervent supporter of their point of view, not because the theories seemed good but because I found them to be the most just of those that were current at the time.

In the anarchist milieu I encountered individuals who were trying as much as possible to get rid of their prejudices, those same prejudices which made this world so stupid and so savage, people with whom I enjoyed talking because they showed me things I could see and touch rather than utopias. More than that, these people were sober, clear thinkers. When with them I didn't need to turn my head the other way as I did with most of the brutes, their mouths didn't reek of alcohol or tobacco. They seemed reasonable and I found them to have lots of energy and wills of iron.

My opinions solidified, I became a part of the group, I wanted no part of the world in which I worked for others, I wanted to work for myself, but in order to do that, I didn't have much choice, but I had acquired some experience in some areas, and, full of energy myself, I resolved to defend myself to the death, against the stupid yelping of the present society.

I left Paris when I was nineteen and a half, because I saw that everything in the city was becoming regimented. I understood what the words republic, liberty, equality, fraternity, flag, country and so on meant. I mulled these words over, what part I was to take in all of this and I also spoke with my friends about the supposed valor of that social vocabulary that surrounded me; I understood the horrible hypocrisy represented by the language of the state. It's all nothing more than a religion, like God's religion that gets slopped out to the world's religious folk. They say to them. 'respect your country, die for your country, but what is the nation for me, it's all the earth without borders. "Country" is where I live, whether it is in Germany, Russia, or France, for me "country" or "nation"

When, accidentally, there was a gesture of revolt by the imbeciles (I make no distinction by trade here), the boss threatened to fire them and the imbeciles calmed down immediately.

I went on strike once too but I quickly understood the meaning and the ramifications of this token gesture. All of those 'men', incapable of acting individually, appointed a leader whose responsibility it was to discuss the discontent amongst our members with the boss.

Some times, this stupid leader sold out to the boss by asking for a small bribe, whereas when the other brutes had no money, he suggested they return to work if they needed to pay for things. These were the results, the rewards we got from the strikes, and when we did finally get a raise, the capitalists reacted by increasing the cost of our food, so much so that nothing really changed, we had lost a lot of time and energy, that's all. Also, in the unions, I only made one short appearance, as I was quickly aware that all of these gentlemen were noting more than profiteers and careerists who screamed for rebellion everywhere, but why? I understood that they wanted to destroy the present state so that they could put themselves in power, to change the whole apparatus in name only. Like the capitalists, they utilized the same technique: promises. One's sincerity, in the end, is only one more lousy working class trait to be exploited. When I left this, I came upon a group which was somewhat different: the revolutionaries. I then became an anarchist. I was eighteen, I didn't want to return to work and I started my campaign of individual reprisals once more, with the same unfortunate luck as before. After three or four months, I was arrested. I was sentenced to two months imprisonment. When I got out I tried to find work. I worked on a general strike, during which we had a lot of trouble with the police. I was arrested and sentenced to six days in jail.

tant, that he was constantly urged in his C.P. days to change his profession; and that when he at last was seen working as a cinema commissionaire he was greeted by fellow-members with the cry, "So you've really joined the lumpenproletariat now!" Marx certainly did not mean the lower-paid or the menial jobs were "lumpen" (though he did not rate them highly, if they were not productive) - it was to the "children of the Jago" he was referring (born to crime because there was no alternative to starvation); those upon whom the Salvation Army was to batten. As a legal-minded Socialist, though he blamed the capitalist, a class born to crime was repugnant to him.

Blanquism

This was not the view of the Blanquists. For a long time their views were not considered, because when the Paris Commune marked "the parting of the ways" between Marxism and Anarchism, Blanquism was nowhere to be seen. It missed its chance. Blanqui was in prison before, during and after the Commune. His revolutionary vanguard to "lead the masses" was not there to lead. Since that time Blanquism has reappeared; it constitutes the strand of Bolshevik-Leninism with its idea of the elitist Party leadership. The more modern extension of this, that believes that military adventure, fighting in the streets for power or peasant rising suffices itself, without industrial backing, has forgotten it owes all that to Blanqui. The idea of student leadership is merely a younger version of the belief in leadership by the failed ex-student or "declassé" intellectual.

However, it was among the Blanquists proper that the idea (that for a long time animated many movements, including the Social-Democratic, especially the Russian) came about of the pro-

fessional revolutionary leadership supplementing its earnings by armed robbery. The Party was above morality. It condemned the private criminal, however; Stalin, for instance, though he himself took part in bank robbery, denounced as “adventurism” any form of “premature” armed uprising.

This is a view that was revived in France during the Second World War. It was hard at times to tell where the “underground” finished and the “underworld” began. When the Black Market flourished in France, it was possible for the workers to eat: they naturally took a different view of it from the English workers, who denounced “profiteers.” When the underground broke German laws, even the French bourgeoisie, such as was not actively collaborating, could “scarce forbear to cheer.”

Anarchists

The confusion between underworld and underground had always been strongest in Tsarist Russia. Asked about the Houndsditch affair, Rudolf Rocker told the “Morning Post” it was “not easy in England to understand what had driven such men to becoming desperadoes. It was necessary to consider the situation in Russia where the Government had instituted a reign of terror ...the entire populations of many Lettish villages had been publicly flogged, including old women, men and children. Their homes were burned down and the people were living in the forest like wild beasts.” The Anarchists did not idealise the “Lazarus Class” but their attitude was different from Marxists or Blanquiste, though individual Anarchists might accept the views of Marx or Blanqui. Their attitude was largely determined by French experience. After the repression of the Commune, the French workers had been systematically reduced to poverty. The whole of the previous economy, which rest-

don't think of myself as a machine), I would have liked to teach myself, to know lots of things, to develop my intelligence, as well as my body, in one word, to become a being incapable of moving out in all directions as he pleases, needing as little as possible from others around him. But to get to that point, I needed time, I needed books. How could I get those things while remaining so tied to my work? It was impossible for me to pull these things together as I had to eat and in order to do that I had to work and for whom? For a boss. I thought all this over and said for myself: I am going to change jobs once again, maybe things will go better for me now, but I really hadn't expected to encounter a social system such as the one I find myself fighting constantly these days; I was pretty interested in mechanical work, but when I inquired about working, mechanics responded: We'd like to take you on but we can't pay you because you wouldn't work fast enough since you don't know anything about what it takes to be a mechanic. . . they would (one day) pay me, but only once I know the rudiments of the trade, which meant in fifteen to eighteen months (or more) and then they could pay me six to eight francs a day for ten to twelve hours of work per day. The state really began to disgust me at this point. In the end I found work digging embankments but nothing changed: I had to work a lot in order to fall short of satisfying even my most basic needs. I came to the same conclusions in looking at situations all around me; I saw nothing but poverty for those who worked at my side and, worse, all these miserable people instead of trying to get out of the rut they were in, dug in their heels and drank themselves into oblivion, thereby casting their faculties of reason to the wind.

I saw all that, I saw the exploiter getting satisfied by the whole thing, and worse, I saw him pay for rounds of drinks for men who had already drunk too much; and for good reason, for while they got smashed, the workers couldn't think and that's what was necessary to keep them under the authority of the exploiting bosses.

I was sentenced to three months in prison; and then I understood justice as it really was; my chum who was charged with the same crime (because we were working together) was given only two months, and that only a suspended sentence (of observation and good conduct). Why that was, I have always wondered. But I can say that I give no one the right to judge me, be he a judge from the educational system or one from the tribunal, because no one can possibly understand or know the reasons for my actions; no one can put himself in my place in one word no one can be me.

When I got out of prison, I returned to my parents, who reproached me severely. But to have undergone what I did in the name of "Justice", that is, prison, made me all the more rebellious. I started working again, although not the same job. (See, after having worked in an office for some time, I threw myself into work with a butcher, then into work in a deli, something which I did well, but, now wherever I went, people asked me for some sort of certification. I didn't have any, no one wanted to hire me, and that made me even more rebellious. That's when I began to play games in order to find work, I fixed up false certificates and finally found work for sixteen to eighteen hours a day for 70 to 80 francs a week, seven days a week, and when I asked for a day's vacation Monsieur the Boss got angry.

At the end of these months of work there, I was distraught and exhausted and yet I had to keep going for fear of dying of hunger, seeing that what I earned was just enough to pay for my most basic needs, but to look at what was going on the other side of the street, I felt that my boss was reaping all the benefits of MY work and what was he doing to deserve THAT? Nothing, other than reminding me that I had arrived ten minutes late or criticizing my work and threatening me with losing my job if my work didn't improve.

ed upon the one-man workshop, had been broken up; capitalism was being imposed late, and with all the callousness of the early nineteenth century. Thousands of Communards had been shot, deported or were in exile. Anyone who tried to re-establish the working-class movement was liable to be exiled; imprisonment or unemployment were certain to follow upon militancy.

In the middle of this, Anarchist propaganda began again; and in particular "propaganda by deed." Political assassination, and attacks upon the bourgeoisie became a commonplace of French Anarchism. It struck terror in the hearts of the bourgeoisie. Mere political assassination they could understand: it was part and parcel of the French ruling-class game. (Louis XIV's lettres de cachet; Napoleon's kidnapping of the due d'Enghien; Napoleon III's membership in the Carbonari) The idea of attacks upon the bourgeoisie, non-politicians ("innocent people!" they cried - "there are no innocent bourgeoisie" replied the condemned) threw them into alarm. It was a terror quite unequalled in other countries where kings, queens and presidents were assassinated. It was well understood by the French proletariat. They began to sing about the assassinations ("la Ravachole") and to remind the bourgeoisie they were not all-powerful. The employer about to sack his militants heard the songs about Ravachol or Emile Henry whistled in his factory, and decided a few francs extra a day would not ruin him. Within a generation, a mass movement was born: the syndicalist movement which aimed at nothing less than the occupation by the workers of their places of work.

Needless to say in such circumstances the Parisian worker, and ultimately the Anarchist movement, retained a soft spot for the "underworld." It is true that many ordinary criminals used to speak about social equality in order to justify their aims. But nobody in France expected that the criminals "should contribute to

the party funds.” The French worker, awakened in his self-respect by individual acts of individual workers, felt no need for an elite.

When that particular struggle was over, and the long years of the Dreyfus Case, that split France, were also over, the Bonnot Gang appeared. They claimed to be anarchists; they probably were. They appealed to the imagination of the Parisians. They were hardly “gentle grafters” but the nearest to it in France was “bandits tragiques,” romantic robbers. It was believed they took from the rich to give to the poor. They were “good guys” and the flics were “baddies” because the Parisians understood that when the chips were down, the Bonnot Gang was ultimately on their side and the police with their clubs would be on the other (even in time of war, even in time of foreign occupation). They were not “lump” to the Parisians. They were at most “les misérables.” In the finish they did not awaken the proletariat à la Blanqui; but their subsequent careers showed they learned a lot from the proletariat. In particular, that the bourgeois criminals of society had the big battalions on their side, and would ultimately come to dominate the underworld; the Bonnot Gang went down fighting as the last of the Apaches.

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invented all kinds of torture systems such as prisons, etc.

Why does this minority which ‘has’ seem stronger than the majority which ‘has not’? Because this majority is ignorant and lacking in energy; it allows all sorts of caprices on the part of those who ‘have’ by simply slouching its shoulders at each new caprice that comes up. These people are too faint-hearted to revolt themselves and, even better, if amongst them there are some who leave the flock, the others hold them back, either directly or indirectly, to without knowing it, but nevertheless in just as dangerous a manner. They claim honesty, but underneath that facade hides a hypocrisy and a cowardice which cannot be disavowed.

That someone could bring an honest man before me!

It is due to all of these things that I have revolted, it’s because I didn’t want to live the life of the present society, because I didn’t want to wait until death to be alive that I defended myself against my oppressors by all means at my disposition.

From my earliest days, I knew the authority of the father and mother and before I was even old enough to understand what it all meant, I rebelled against that authority, just as I did against the authority of the educational system.

I was thirteen at the time. I started working; when I began to experience and understand what was going on around me. I also became familiar with life and social abuse; I saw people I found to be bad and corrupt, and told myself: “I must find a way to get out of this shit of bosses, workers, bourgeoisie, judges, officers, and others; all of these people disgust me, some become they allow themselves to go through the motions of life without really doing a thing.” Not wanting to be exploited or, on the other hand, to be an exploiter of others, I stole from the shelves of stores, without getting too far head, the first time I was arrested I was seventeen;

“Why I Took Part in a Burglary, Why I Committed Murder”

The Trial Statement of Raymond Callemin (also known as Raymond-la-Science, member of the turn-of-the century Paris illegalist culture and the celebrated ‘Bonnot Gang’)

Every being comes into the world with a right to live a real life. This is indisputable, for it is nature’s law. Also I ask myself why, on this earth, there are people who expect to have all the rights. They give the pretext that they have money, but if one asks them where they got their money from, what do they answer? As for myself, I answer as follows: “I give no one the right to impose his own wishes, regardless of the pretext given. I don’t see why I wouldn’t have the right to eat those grapes or those apples just because they are the property of Mr. X. . . .What did he do that I have not that let’s him alone gain an advantage? I answer nothing and consequently I have the right to make use of things according to my need and if he wants to prevent me forcibly I will revolt and against his strength I will oppose my own because, finding myself attacked, I will defend myself by any means at my disposal.’

“That’s why, to those who will say that they have money and, thus, I must obey them, I will say;’ When you are able to demonstrate that part of the whole represents the whole, that this is another earth than that on which you have been born, as I have, and that this is another sun the one which lights the way and makes plants grow and fruit ripen, when you have proven that, I will give you the right to keep me from living, because, well, where DOES money come from: from the earth, and silver is one part of the earth transformed into a metal that came to be called silver and one part of the world monopolized this silver and, in using this metal, violently forced the rest of the world to obey it. For this end, they

The Bonnot Gang Cult

Recently, the Bonnot Gang has become a popular cult, a folk tradition set to the tempo of commercial entertainment. Since the imported American cult of “Bonnie and Clyde,” who had scarcely a thought in their head between them but for the fact that they were sound on the banking system, the impresarios have cast their eyes on the “bandits tragiques.” Films, books, stories, even clubs devoted to their memory. Middle-aged Parisians who grew-up with the Bonnot Gang sinking into their memory as some sort of modern Robin Hood and his Merrie Men, may pause to wonder at the cult of Bonnot dead from those who would have been his bitterest foes alive...

The conditions of the Paris workers, and in particular of the so-called “underworld” (not quite the same as ours, but rather a “lumpenproletariat” with its own quarter and traditions) were reaching bottom level in the period before the first World War. After the Franco-Prussian War, the master-artisan - who constituted the bulk of the working class and though described as ‘petit bourgeois’ was in fact the main productive unit - was to be wiped out of existence. To some extent, the Paris Commune was the last stand of the independent worker against the factory system. Now the manufacturing class was endeavouring to force the independent-minded worker, with his background not far removed from that of the peasant, into the conveyor belt and factory line. As in England

during the Industrial Revolution, there was dispossession, misery and economic stress. The main means of economic existence for the lower strata of Paris was the great influx of wealthy foreigners, since the Great Exhibition had invented a permanent tourist traffic of which Paris was the first beneficiary. It had become a regular part of Paris life that there should be a “criminal quarter”; the tourist paid heavily to see it; the police guarded comfortable bourgeoisie around the brothels and the night life; a large and growing part of the population was in effect sold into a type of bond slavery from which there was no escape. Zola has depicted it graphically.

And yet this was the Paris of the revolutionaries; which had in 1871, “stormed the heavens” by changing society and challenging the grand-bourgeoisie; it had been sternly crushed by the Versailles troops when the Commune was overwhelmed, but with the activities of the Anarchist terrorists in the ‘eighties and ‘nineties, they had begun to get their confidence again. From a period in which no worker dared speak of increased wages or combination against the employers, there was a sudden transition to militant syndicalist activity. During the Versailles repression, the best a militant worker could expect was the sack; it was more likely that the gendarmerie would come for him. And suddenly, with a “whiff of dynamite,” all that was changed. The factory owner who had once been so confident that he had suppressed the workers for good and all, now found that there was a wave of sabotage, or that his managers were beaten-up, or even (but this was the final horror) that they might leave a bomb in his own chateau. Suddenly the employers began worrying about their workers not forming themselves into law-abiding trade unions. For the C.G.T. was not a legalistic body. It began as a militant body: and the local Bourses du Travail combined the best features of our Mechanics’ Institutes and Trades Councils with the ideas of take-over workers’ control. By the early

estimate, by the way that Jacob considerably inflated). One of the most memorable break-ins was at the Cathedral of Tours, where the band stole 17th century tapestries valued at 200,000 francs. They left behind a graffito: “All-powerful god, find your thieves!”

In late 1903, three members of the band were caught in Abbeville by a cop, Provost, who was shot dead. The burglars escaped, but two were caught in a trap set for them in Paris, and this arrest led to the arrests of most of the members. After 18 months investigation by a magistrate, the trial of 23 out of the 29 accused members began in March 1905. Most were found guilty: Jacob and Bour (who apparently killed Provost) were sentenced to hard labor for life in the penal colonies. Fourteen other members received sentences totaling 100 years. Another ten, among them Jacob’s mother, were acquitted. Jacob was deported to the penal colony in the lies du Saint in January 1906 and served twenty years, including 8 years 11 months in chains. Due to a campaign for his release organized primarily by his mother, he was released in 1925. He took up work as a traveling salesman, selling hosiery and clothing until his death by a deliberate morphine overdose on Aug. 28, 1954. The accounts of his friends show that Marius Jacob did not commit suicide out of despair, but out of a calm desire to avoid the infirmities of old age.

Looking back on his experiences in 1948 Jacob observed: “I don’t think that illegalism can free the individual in present-day society. If he manages to free himself of a few constraints using this means, the unequal nature of the struggle will create others that are even worse and, in the end, will lead to the loss of his freedom, the little freedom he had, and sometimes his life. Basically, illegalism, considered as an act of revolt, is more a matter of temperament than of doctrine. This is why it cannot have an educational effect on the working masses as a whole. By this, I mean a worthwhile educational effect

don his life as a sailor for health reasons, and returned to France. By then he had already been introduced to the anarchist milieu by a friend, and became an anarchist. Soon after, in 1896, at the end of the period of "propaganda by the deed" in France, he was set up by an agent provocateur who procured explosives for then snitched him off. He was sentenced to six months' imprisonment at age 17. After his release, the police systematically visited each of his employers and got him fired. Together with two anarchist friends he hatched a scheme to pass himself off as a senior police officer, and carried out a fake raid on a pawnshop in Marseilles in May, 1899. He then traveled to Spain and Italy. Upon his return to France he was arrested in Toulon, then imprisoned in Aix-la-Provenec. He escaped and turned to illegalism on a full-time basis.

Around 1900, Jacob formed a band of anarchist illegalists who specialized in burglaries and fencing stolen goods. The band was based in Paris but operated throughout France, as well as in Italy and Belgium. The band was well-organized and very professional. The members' activities fell into three main categories: the scouts, who went from town to town looking for homes whose owners were absent and collected the information necessary to make the break-ins function flawlessly; the burglars, with a set of first-rate tools at their disposal, valued at 10,000 francs (easily \$2500); and a fencing operation to sell the loot. Jacob persuaded some of the members to contribute ten percent of their take to anarchist propaganda efforts; some, refused on individualist grounds, preferring to keep their share. The band stole only from "social parasites" like priests, the wealthy and military officers. They spared the poor and those whose occupations they considered useful, like doctors, architects and writers. By common agreement, murder was excluded as an option except in cases of legitimate self-defense. The band was armed. To minimize the risk of violence, they perfected a system of door seats which they attached to all exits of the buildings they were "working" in, Jacob later admitted that he participated in 106 burglaries, whose take was estimated at 5 million francs (an

years of the century, it was a formidable force; it was an anarcho-syndicalist union aiming at the abolition of government by means of the General Strike, and actively preparing for the replacement of the management of industry by the workers themselves.

The bourgeoisie, awakened from the sectarian panics of the Dreyfus Case, looked around themselves in alarm. They wanted to suppress the workers; but the lessons of the 'nineties had been learned. No longer could they shoot and exile; they had to turn to subtler, more English ways of influencing events and opinions; by the growth and encouragement of parliamentary socialism, for instance, and by the sudden new enthusiasms of the Radicals for the cause of the workers. Radical and socialist parties, professing revolutionary aims even to the point of Blanquism (the elite who would lead the masses through confrontation with the police - which they themselves never confronted, except as lawyers in the courts) vied for popular support. Meantime the lawyers and professional men that dominated the political parties brought in the usual arguments for participation in elections; and they themselves moved from Extreme Left to Extreme Right, with a steady progression that ever after marked French politics. They still used revolutionary phrases (Laval used them up to 1939) and still angled for popular support against the Right Wing - there was always a solid Right even beyond the Right, a cancer that moved from hooliganism to national treason. But in the early part of the century it was on the defensive. Clerical fascism had been routed, monarchism discredited and out of politics.

And as the new Left grew in size, and parliamentary socialism was able to spread its wings, and the C.G.T. itself came under the influence of socialists and radicals, so once more, as steadily

as a barometer, the standard of living of the workers dropped. The French bourgeoisie was thrifty. It paid nothing for nothing. Once it had diverted the workers' movement away from revolutionary Anarchism and into reformist Socialism, it stopped being timorous and on the pretext of an economic crisis cut wages again, sacked militants, and arrested opponents at the drop of a hat.

One of the men who was sacked at this period (1911) was Jules Bonnot. He knew one or two more in the same position. They were sitting idly in a café bar in Montmartre, playing cards desultorily, when he burst out with his famous declaration: "Aren't you all sick and tired of this wretched existence? Here we are, flogging a stolen bicycle here, and pushing a few dud coins there, or even stooping to pick up our ridiculous wages from the foreman, capitalism's galley-master, after a long week's work at the factory - and what do we get out of it? Nothing! You all talk about revolution and illegality, but what do you do about it?" "What do you expect us to do?" one of them asked him sarcastically. "Rob a bank?" "Precisely," he said. And they did. It began as simply as that...

Jules Bonnot

Alas for the romanticists, Bonnot was no film hero (it was announced there would be a film, and so it is interesting to know what they make out of him!) Born in 1876, and 35 at the time of the meeting in Montmartre, he had an ordinary working class background. He had been a forward pupil in school, had become a good apprentice, done his conscription without protest; and gone into the factory in due course. An able mechanic, he worked in

feiting, swindling and robbery became a way of life for hundreds of individualists, as it was already for countless thousands of proletarians. The wave of anarchist bombings and assassinations of the 1890s (Auguste Vaillant, Ravachol, Emile Henry, Sante Caserio) and the practice of illegalism from the mid-1880s to the start of the First World War (Clément Duval, Pini, Marius Jacob, the Bonnot gang) were twin aspects of the same proletarian offensive, but were expressed in an individualist practice, one that complemented the great collective struggles against capital. The illegalist comrades were tired of waiting for the revolution. The acts of the anarchist bombers and assassins ("propaganda by the deed") and the anarchist burglars ("individual reappropriation") expressed their desperation and their personal, violent rejection of an intolerable society. Moreover, they were clearly meant to be exemplary, invitations to revolt.

All of society's snares lay in wait for the illegalists, and to survive they were forced to make compromises, such as dealing with organized crime. They were constantly at risk of being set up by informers and agents provocateurs. When their nearly inevitable arrests occurred, some made deals with the cops and turned in their friends; others did long prison terms. In France the laws were draconian then. Prisons were much worse and the penal colonies were basically death camps (1). The guillotines were constantly supplied with fresh meat. Hundreds of illegalists were imprisoned. Many abandoned their anarchist politics, degenerating to the point where they behaved in a completely mercenary way. What started out as a revolt against bourgeois society usually turned into a purely economic affair, reproducing the cycle of "crime" and repression.

Marius Jacob was one of the foremost exponents and practitioners of anarchist illegalism in pre-war France. He was born to working class parents in Marseilles on Sept. 27, 1879. After finishing school he went to sea to train as a sailor. His sailing included a long voyage along the west coast of Africa. At 16 he had to aban-

THE “ILLEGALISTS”

by Doug Imrie

(From *“Anarchy: a Journal Of Desire Armed”*, Fall-Winter, 1994-95)

It is idiotic that those who have figured things out are forced to wait for the mass of cretins who are blocking the way to evolve. The herd will always be the herd. So let's leave it to stagnate and work on our own emancipation (...) Put your old refrains aside. We have had enough of always sacrificing ourselves for something. The Fatherland, Society and Morality have fallen (...) That's fine, but don't contribute to reviving new entities for us: the Idea, the Revolution, Propaganda, Solidarity; we don't give a damn. What we want is to live, to have the comforts and well-being we have a right to. What we want to accomplish is the development of our individuality in the full sense of the word, in its entirety The individual has a right to all possible well-being, and must try to attain it all the time, by any means..." (Hégot, an illegalist, writing to the anarchist journal *Les Temps Nouveaux* in 1903, on behalf of a “small circle” who shared his opinions.)

Parallel to the social, collectivist anarchist current there was an individualist one whose partisans emphasized their individual freedom and advised other individuals to do the same. Individualist anarchist activity spanned the full spectrum of alternatives to authoritarian society, subverting it by undermining its way of life facet by facet. The vast majority of individualist anarchists were caught in the trap of wage labor like their collectivist comrades and the proletariat in general: they had to work for peanuts or starve. Some individualists rebelled by withdrawing from the economy and forming voluntary associations to achieve self-sufficiency. Others took the route of illegalism, attacking the economy through the direct individual reappropriation of wealth. Thus theft, counter-

Switzerland, and in Lyons and Saint-Etienne in France, travelling around to get work, as was then the custom (“work won't come to you,” said the wise women). Ultimately he joined the union; married; had a son; became a militant syndicalist. His activities marked him down for dismissal and more travelling; his wife left him and took his son with her (up to 1911, he was still trying to get her to come back to him).

By 1907, he could no longer find work. He tried to set up on his own; opened his own workshop; became a master-artisan; found another sweetheart. But of course his little repair workshop did not flourish. The ‘petit bourgeois’ productive worker was a dying class. He tried to make counterfeit money. The car boom was coming on, and he became one of the first to specialise in stolen cars, altering and re-shaping bodies, fitting new license plates. Later on, the press were to speak of it all as a sinister existence, investing all his actions with the aura of dread and fear. Hence the folk cult. But the truth of it was, like many French workers of the period, he could not get work; he failed as a bourgeois; and he went from failed bourgeois existence to the ranks of the “lumpenproletariat.” As he said, it was a stolen bicycle here and a dud coin there... What was the purpose of such an existence?

Bonnot & Anarchism

Coming into contact with the Anarchist movement in Paris, he mixed with the group publishing “*l'Anarchie*,” originally edited by Albert Libertad. Among them was the able writer Kibal-tchiche, a young man who had begun life in extreme poverty, in Belgium, and had moved into the revolutionary struggle. (Later,

under the name 'Victor Serge', he moved to support of the Communists in Russia, and was one of the earliest who moved from orthodox communism to Trotskyism, and subsequently to a criticism of the Soviet Union as such.)

Another Anarchist with whom Bonnot came into contact was Soudy, expelled from job after job for his syndicalist activities, and imprisoned more than once; who had come out of prison tubercular and rebellious. He had done his military service and could handle a rifle with deadly accuracy, thanks to the French Republic.

Cheeky, tousle-haired Gamier had been born into a family of illegalists. His father, a roadmender, was a militant syndicalist who had refused his military service and gone "on the run" and he had brought up his family the same way. The son, like the father, refused military service, lived amongst anarchist friends and perforce led an illegal existence. He was the one they called 'Poil du Carotte'.

The Band

Altogether there were twenty who joined Bonnot's band after that first outburst in Montmartre. Some were Belgian: Carouy, a metalcaster, with an enormous physique, whom they sent for as soon as they were "in business." Callemine, 21, was fond of music and the theatre, and had an overwhelming aversion to violence (which he overcame). Most of them were French: all of them had been unemployed for some time, without anything to look forward to, without any means of support at the end of the week.

tor Serge) has only recently died, and one or two returned to the labor movement to pursue humdrum lives in the union offices.

THAT was the end of the story. But it was not quite the end of the story, either. For some reason the romantic legend of the 'bandits tragiques' would not die. They obstinately popped up into folk culture; to the exasperation of the police and the lawyers. Procureur-General Fabre stated that they 'used anarchy as a cloak to cover a long series of crimes against the community.' But nobody believed him...Like the wild colonial boy, like Robin Hood, everyone believed they robbed the rich to help the poor and could not find it in their hearts to say that this was a crime against the community. 'Much ink has been spilled on the story of this band,' protests M. le Prefect Morain. And songs, too, and anecdotes each more fantastic than the last... And now the film industry has found out the story of the Bonnot Gang. Paris filmgoers today, the rest of the world tomorrow, will learn a new - but we doubt true - version.

Still, there it is! And talking at streetcorners to unheeding people does not get one that far! If we are discussing Anarchism, then the exploits of the Bonnot Gang, or of Ravachol and similar figures, do not get us very far. But if we are studying the warp and woof of revolutionary movements under capitalism; the effect of such movements upon a deprived and almost outcaste 'submerged' class; and the way in which it will respond since it does not exercise any other form of power, then an examination of the legend (and the fact) is absorbing.

* * * * *

The Trial

Bonnot left a note acquitting other people of responsibility. But the entire gang, such as remained alive (with one exception, who escaped) went to trial. Others were arrested for mere association. These included the editor of "l'Anarchie", De Boe, and Louise Kaiser. Gamier and Valet having been killed while resisting arrest, many of the deeds they had committed were blamed on others who had not participated in them. But Gamier had left a confession, implicating himself and exonerating others, counter-signed and his finger-prints in case of dispute. The general trial opened in February, 1913. Many alleged crimes had to be struck off the sheet for want of proof. It was quite clear that the police had arrested innocent and guilty alike. Among the innocent were Mme. Maitrejean, who had taken over the editorship of "l'Anarchie" and probably Dieudonne. "Callemin, Monier, Carouy, and Metge never ceased during the whole case to meet and to call for 'proofs' " protested Alfred Morain, Paris Prefect of Police (The Underworld of Paris - Secrets of the Surete, English trans.) "It seems undeniable that Dieudonne was not concerned with the murder of Gaby...Callemin openly stated his own guilt and the innocence of Dieudonne. 363 questions were put to the jury, who deliberated for fifteen hours. GUILTY was pronounced on Dieudonne, Callemin, Soudy, and Monier - death; Carouy and Metge - life sentences; Renard - six years; Kilbatchiche, Payer, and Croyat - five years; the others, lesser terms. NOT GUILTY: Rodriguez, and the woman Maitrejean, Schoop and Barbe le Clech. (Apart, of course, from those finally not brought to trial.) Carouy committed suicide. Dieudonne was reprieved at the last moment. The other three were guillotined. Some of the survivors are still alive: Kibaltchiche (Vic-

There was no alternative to illegality so far as they were concerned (except death by starvation, or joining the Army). The sole question at issue was: what type? Most of them had been associated with the syndicalist movement; all of them were active in the anarchist cause, and some of them continued to contribute to anarchist funds and causes after they moved to banditry, in some cases surreptitiously, because they did not want to associate the anarchists with themselves.

One can see how it was that they preserved a certain code of ethics of their own; which was perhaps why they gained public sympathy from the first. The public was not particularly concerned with banks losing money or even with gendarmerie losing their lives. They could thrill to the exploits of the bandits without conscience about the victims. The French police have never gone out of their way to ask for public sympathy, and they have never got it either. When a police force uses brutal methods to disperse crowds, or has been used by a repressive government to fire upon its own people, or is associated with grossly unfair and inhuman punishments such as deportation to penal settlements for labor offences, it cannot and does not expect or merit public sympathy.

The Boys With The Dashing Air

Besides, there was always a charmingly amateur air about the Bonnot Gang that appealed to the public mind, the way a professional mobster like Al Capone could never do. It had in common with the "Bonnie and Clyde" team that it was "the damnd'est

gang you ever saw”: ill-assorted, with its suave good-looking men, and horny-handed toilers; the squat Herculean Belgian and his little compatriot; the dapper intellectual and the hardened trade union militant... young Garnier, born into a tradition of military desertion; and the ladies of the gang, who supported their men faithfully; and the incessant discussions on revolution (which they carried into the workers’ press) and whether illegal activity was helping the movement or hindering it; and the articles in the anarchist papers defending themselves, not against the public or the police, but against what their comrades in the open movement might think of them.

Outrage

The first time that the bourgeois press cried “OUTRAGE!” at the Bonnot Gang activity was over the affair in the rue Ordener, a few days before Christmas, 1911. It was one of the first motor car raids, and is thus a milestone in the march of “progress”. The Societe General was raided. As the bank courier left the Societe’s doors, he was attacked by the gang, who jumped on him from their car, and snatched his satchel. They jumped back again and drove off at top speed, firing on whoever gave chase. A familiar scene later on in the century; this was one of the first times it had happened. Four days later, they broke into the Foury Armoury in the rue Lafayette, just as it was closing for the holidays, and later, in the New Year, they raided the American Armaments Factory in the boulevard Haussmann. They stole pistols, Brownings and rifles.

In February, they stole their second car, belonging to an industrialist from Beziers. With it they planned to rob the Nimes

days later, however, he was found in the home of Jean Dubois, not a member of the gang, a Russian who kept a garage in Choisy-le-roi and who was sympathetic to Bonnot.

The superintendent of the Surete Nationale, M. Guillaume, himself, with a head of armed policemen, raided the garage. When they burst in, Dubois was repairing a motorcycle. According to the police, he resisted arrest by shooting back at them; but another version states that he immediately hid behind a car, shouting “Murderers!” when they opened fire. It may be that Dubois, though an anarchist, did not know Bonnot’s identity. The police charged through the house, and encircled Bonnot’s room, sending for reinforcements to the local police, gendarmerie and National Guard. When finally the Commissioner for les Halles, M. Guichard, came with the gendarmerie, he found Dubois bullet-ridden, dead, and the Surete surrounding the room where Bonnot was hiding in a mattress. They all burst into the room and riddled the mattress with bullets. He was dragged out, to die on the way to the police station (according to the official report) although according to another report, the police would not enter until a local civilian - the postman, to be exact - ventured in to see if Bonnot was really dead; when he reported that he was, not only the police but the entire army of soldiers, Zouaves, bystanders, onlookers, hysterical civilians, all Nogent-sur-Marne and its military reinforcements, came charging in.

The police complained bitterly of the lack of military support; indeed, they came to a punch-up with some Zouave officers, and tore the epaulettes off one officer as a supreme insult.

me from having a peaceful existence. As you've been frank enough to admit, the fact that I've been traced has not been due to your perspicacity, but to the fact that there was a stool pigeon amongst us. You can be sure he's had his come-uppance since. Your reward of 10,000 francs to my girl-friend to turn me in, must have troubled you, NLGuichard... you really shouldn't be so lavish with State funds. A bit more, and III hand myself over, with guns thrown in.

You know something, Guichard, you're so bad at your lousy profession I feel like turning up and putting you right myself. Oh, I know you'll win in the finish all right. You have a formidable arsenal at your disposal, and what have we got? Nothing. Well be beaten because you're the stronger and we're the weaker, but in the meantime, we hope that you'll have to pay for your victory.

Looking forward to seeing you (?) -Gamier."

The Showdown

The showdown was not long in coming. At Berck-sur-Mer, Soudy was arrested (30th March). It was a few days after the band had seized a car, and in the course of the struggle, the driver had been shot dead. Soudy, the little man with the gun, with his "gentle grey eyes", had always been unlucky in life, and now he was the first to be caught. But the net was closing in on them all. The police had been alerted to the district. In a few days they had taken Carouy and Callemin. The Deputy Superintendent of the Surete, M. Jouin, had himself taken charge of the operation. Searching house-to-house in Petit-Ivry, they found where Gaudy was lodging. They surrounded the house and raided it. Bonnot was there himself. They shot it out, and Bonnot killed Jouin and wounded one of the inspectors with him. As they retreated, he escaped. Four

mining company, from which one of them had once been dismissed for his trade union activity. They proceeded to a wave of robbery throughout February. Bonnot's name became famous; the press spoke incessantly of "les bandits tragiques". "Where would they strike next?" asked the headlines.

The working-class papers, however, had a different pre-occupation: where would such activities end? Most people in the Anarchist movement reckoned that there was a clear-cut distinction between the political attentat, directed against repression, dictatorship, political domination, or even (as in the case of Emile Henry) against the bourgeoisie indiscriminantly, in revenge for police attacks upon the workers indiscriminantly, on the one hand; and mere criminal action, for the enrichment of the perpetrators, on the other.

To be sure, any criminal could say he was attacking the bourgeoisie (which was in any case more profitable than attacking the worker). But the "outrages" at the turn of the century had clearly defined political overtones, even in the case of Ravachol, and if sometimes they had been associated with ordinary crime, this could be overlooked. However, such "outrages" had mitigated police repression to the point where it was now possible to organize legally, to publish papers and so on. Where such liberties had not been challenged, the "outrages" had not taken place; where they did not exist, they multiplied. This was particularly the case in Tsarist Russia, where a whole section of the police was actually engaged in the business of "outrage" in order to justify its own existence. Its foreign section paid agents-provocateurs and bribed foreign police and provokers, in order to stir up feeling against political exiles. (This was particularly the case in England.)

The Popularity Of The Gang

If the undoubted popularity of the Bonnot Gang with the workers made it some time before the conclusion was reached, on the whole that conclusion, so far as the Anarchist movement was concerned, was hostile to the suggestion that criminality was any aid to the revolutionary movement. It is characteristic of the engaging nature of many of the participants of the Gang, however, that many of them, too, came to the same conclusion. Not that "crime did not pay", but that criminality like legality was merely a form of capitalism.

There was one other factor that influenced their popularity. The entire intelligence service of Paris had been discredited during the Dreyfus affair. It was perhaps reasonable for the old-time Royalist generals and clerico-fascists, the anti-semitic bores of the 1900's, to assume that if there was a spy in the Staff and there was a Jew in the Staff, the two must be identical, and no further proof was needed. But it was totally unforgiveable from the point of view of the whole of France, the bourgeoisie no less than anyone else, that the Second Bureau, the most highly-paid officials in the country, planning for military revenge on Germany, was unable to discover that the whole case against Dreyfus was a mere clerical mare's nest. Not only did they get the wrong man; they let the right man go. Politically, the ultra-Right was ruined by the Dreyfus case; the Radicals took power, and with triumphant Freemasonry in the saddle, there came about a complete change in personnel in the Intelligence Services and also in the Surete Nationale.

The police force underwent a change considerably more drastic than that which took place in Russia in 1917 (where Lenin relied on the old Tsarist Lettish mercenary police to establish his power). For many reasons, however, this police force was more inefficient than the old. The Right Wing was now a dissident force; there were many of the Old Guard lingering in high places before being rooted out, and they relished the spectacle of the Surete Nationale being made to look fools. This situation lasted well into the war (it was Clemenceau who altered it). The case of Mata Hari is one of the classic cases of Surete Nationale bungling. (She was a high-class whore, resident in Paris as a danseuse, not a Frenchwoman, and one of her clients in the German Intelligence had, for intelligible reasons, entered her on his expense account; but she was not a spy, and the only reason she died as a spy was because the Surete could not admit it had made a mistake that would have covered it with ridicule, or risk the accusation that the Freemasons were letting one of their own, a traitor, go free.)

In the case of the Bonnot Gang, few members of the gang made any attempt to disguise themselves. Their photographs were circulated by the Press, which jeered at the police for their apparent inability to do anything about the matter. When the Press made accusations about the gang which were not true, its members wrote and complained. Hunted and in flight after three months of success, they did not hesitate to send sarcastic notes to the bourgeois Press. For instance, the irrepressible Garnier wrote to le Matin (in March 1912):

"Please pass the following note to Gilbert Guichard and the rest (police agents). I assure you that all this hue and cry doesn't prevent