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Domestic Spying: The Case of the French Government and Royalists in the Early Third Republic

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The recent controversy surrounding the continuing revelations and charges of domestic spying and surveillance by the F.B.I., the C.I.A., and even the Internal Revenue Service brings to mind a similar problem and situation in late nineteenth century France. This involved the French government’s persistent but, as it turned out, unnecessary surveillance of the activities of leading conservative politicians and the various royalist parties during the early years of the Third Republic, the results of which can be found in the Archives Nationales under the inflated and rather undeserved title “royalist intrigues”. The contents of these thirteen boxes of reports from prefects, police agents, special investigators and paid informants make interesting reading, not for any information they provide of royalist activities (of which there was surprisingly little), but for what the reports suggest of the government’s attitude and actions: its fear of outsiders, its gullibility, its tendency to overreact and draw upon arbitrary and occasionally illegal police powers, and finally, the bureaucratization and triviality of so much of its investigation.

Already Alexis de Tocqueville in his classic study, *The Old Regime and French Revolution* (1856), had observed of the outlook of the French civil service under the ancien regime monarchy, “. . . its intense dislike for all outsiders, whether of noble or of middle-class extraction, who showed a wish to take a hand, on their own initiative, in public affairs. Any independent group, however small, which seemed desirous of taking action otherwise than under the aegis of the administration filled it with alarm, and the tiniest free association of citizens, however harmless its aims, was regarded as a nuisance.” The material examined in this article is only a small sample of what was clearly an extensive, thorough investigation of various “political” groups in France during the period. There are, for example, more boxes on other “right-wing” groups, the Bonapartists and the clericals, and doubtless even more exist on

1 Archives Nationales, Agissements royalists, 1875-1908, Police Générale, F712-431-12444. These reports are unnumbered, often undated, and in no particular chronological or topical order.

various radical and socialist organizations. However, this should suffice to indicate the French government's response to a real or imagined royalist threat, thereby raising some questions about the nature and usefulness of some aspects of domestic spying.

What prompted French republicans, contrary to their declared principles and their own vigorous complaints of police harassment under the Second Empire, to inaugurate and maintain for nearly twenty-five years this surveillance of their royalist opposition? In part, the answer is that the Republic inherited from previous regimes an administrative and police system that was left largely unreformed; hence, the same, generally apolitical personnel continued to function in the traditional manner, the only difference being that their suspicions and harassments were now directed at royalists, Bonapartists, clericals and radicals instead of republicans. Furthermore, once in power the republicans, like those before them, sensed the partisan advantages of controlling the centralized administration and police that had nothing to do with ideology. As Daniel Halévy, the somewhat disillusioned historian and critic of the Third Republic, later remarked of the republicans' attitude towards the police:

We have had, for ten years, conservative ministers and almost socialist ministers: all have favored the Police. The authoritarian republicans, openly, out of doctrine and tradition. The radical-socialists, for reasons of prudence: audacious (it is their principle), they are afraid of their own audacity and spare and respect the institution half-secretly on which they are counting some day to save them from their own imprudence or the violence of their friends.

Or, as Sanche de Gramont observed recently, "Every Minister of Interior and every police prefect finds his own secret dossier on his desk when he takes power, as a kind of welcome mat." This, then, was the nature of the institution. The French police has its particular traditions, legacies of the Old Regime and Napoleon, and the republicans simply inherited them and, despite apparent ideological differences, left them unchanged.

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More important in determining their outlook were the conditions in which the Republic was founded. Ironically it was not the republicans but the monarchists who established the new regime by the Constitution of 1875, and the conservatives or monarchists relinquished power grudgingly, only after a major political and constitutional crisis, the 16th of May affair in 1877. The republicans finally wrested control of the Republic from their royalist opponents when the conservative president MacMahon resigned in 1879, but they did not forget the bitter struggles of the 1870's. As so often happens, the republicans could not shake their obsessive fear of the Right. They continued to fear the royalists, in spite of the signs of their dwindling influence and debilitating divisions. The republicans' memories and fears were heightened by their appreciation of France's volatile political tradition, which did not encourage any government to treat lightly its opposition. The police, in particular, always kept one eye on the streets where barricades were raised and revolutions made, and in a country that had already experienced five revolutions and two coups d'état, the precautions of the Ministry of Interior and the police are understandable.

Some historians have suggested that, given the weakness of the royalist opposition and the unlikelihood of a return of the monarchy, the period of moderate republican rule from 1879 to 1899 was one of the great wasted opportunities of modern French history. As one royalist leader remarked in 1879, upon hearing of the Prince Imperial's death, "The Republic has the luck of it; the Comte de Paris (the Orleanist pretender who was in contention with the Comte de Chambord, the Legitimist claimant) is alive and the Prince Imperial is dead." On the contrary, the disarray of the royalists did nothing to abate their fear of the monarchists or their insistence on the need to defend the Republic against threats from the Right. Gordon Wright has pointed out that this was partly a tactic of republicans who, themselves divided on many issues, needed the royalist menace as a substitute for the positive program they lacked and frequently as a scapegoat for their own governmental incompetence and unimaginativeness. Even the most dramatic of their undertakings in domestic affairs, the acrimonious anti-clerical program of the 1880's, by which they attacked Catholic interests, served the same purpose; and since the monarchists were the principal (or at least loudest) defenders of the Church's interests, this had the effect of further antagonizing conservative opinion and galvanizing republicans

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8 Wright, *France in Modern Times*, p. 296.
to the defense of the Republic. "The republicans govern badly," the republican writer Anatole France reportedly grumbled at the turn of the century, "but they defend themselves well." 9 Indeed, as the reports of the Prefect of Police indicate, they often defended themselves against non-existent threats or intrigues cooked up or blown out of all proportion by police agents themselves.

Nonetheless, if the republicans exaggerated and manipulated the dangers, their fears do not seem entirely sham. They remained haunted by a specter of royalist intrigues. There was much talk in the police reports of the period of "royalist plots" and, although the government's agents were always rather sketchy about details, these fears seem genuine enough in the beginning. 10 In the early 1880's the government was particularly vigilant about royalist activities and propaganda, reacting to their noisy but harmless and ineffectual actions with an elaborate surveillance that frequently bordered on the absurd. The government had agents and informers within various royalist organizations; they watched over meetings, tailed prominent conservative politicians, infiltrated the entourage of the royalist pretenders, even at times intercepting their mail; and they seized royalist literature, although one prefect had sufficient scruples to remind the government that it was exceeding its powers. "Regarding your recent instructions," he replied to Paris, "I will confiscate the brochures and photographs of the Duc d'Orléans, but I must point out that this action is illegal." 11

In 1884, for example, the Ministry of Interior, concerned about the upcoming legislative elections, instructed the prefects to send it the following information: (1) Has the royalist party been reorganized since the death of the Comte de Chambord? (2) How does this organization function? By arrondissement? By canton? (3) What journals are at the party's disposal? (4) Are there committees? Old or new? How do they differ from the old? (5) General observations. 12 This circular, soon leaked to the press, caused an uproar among royalists; but, while the prefects responded diligently with detailed reports, the investigation failed to substantiate the government's alarm or even to uncover evidence of any significant royalist organization. One report, indeed, indicated that one department, the Eure, had no organization, no committee, and no royalist newspaper; another dutifully noted that the royalists' slogan was

10 Various reports for the 1880's, Agissements royalistes, F712346.
11 Confidential report of a prefect to the Minister of Interior, Police Générale, January 20, 1890, Agissements royalistes, F712438.
12 Eugène Schnerb circular to the prefects, September 5, 1884, Agissements royalistes, F712431.
“Everyone knows that, according to the present republican constitution, it suffices for a vote of the chambers reunited to replace the Republic by the monarchy the day when the country will recognize that such is in its interest in order to avoid more certainly bankruptcy and war,” hardly an incendiary or illegal appeal.\textsuperscript{13} Other reports catalogued the names and dates of the royalist pretenders’ visitors, gave repetitious analyses of the divisions in royalist ranks, and provided nearly verbatim accounts of what was said by those who attended various royalist “action” groups.\textsuperscript{14}

The conservative parties (Orleanists, Legitimists, and Bonapartists) did, in fact, stage something of a resurgence in the elections of 1885. However, most historians agree that this was a temporary success, the result less of effective royalist propaganda than of popular dissatisfaction with republican rule. For the conservatives, a contemporary correctly observed, the seemingly favorable electoral outcome “announces not revival, but death.”\textsuperscript{15} Nevertheless, if 1885 can be regarded in retrospect as the official death of the old conservative party, the government’s surveillance and harassment of royalists continued almost unabated.

One group that particularly drew the government’s attention was the Jeunesse Royaliste, a group of younger, militant royalists whose loud and ostentatious demonstrations and loose talk of a royalist coup d’état seems to have been taken seriously in the late 1880’s. In fact, from the beginning the government’s agents had precise, inside information of the group. The members of the Jeunesse Royaliste talked a lot but, as it turned out, made few efforts to execute their political fantasies. Read the right way, these detailed reports of their plans and conversations are rather humorous, for quite apart from the cumulative picture of respectable but boisterous aristocratic young men playing at “revolution”, the reports indicate the agents’ gullibility—or cupidity—and the government’s paranoia, at least its apparent willingness to accept the flimsiest accounts of clandestine royalist activities. Deadly serious and unrelieved by the slightest traces of skepticism, these reports chronicle plans, plots, meetings that never materialized, the noisy incidents that fizzled out, the hopelessness of their opposition, reduced as they were to theoretical, largely imaginary conspiracies, or useless distribution of literature, most of which had to be posted at night and was immediately seized by the police.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{13} Undated report of 1884, Agissements royalistes, F712431.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{15} Georges Hoog, Les Conservateurs et la IIIe République (Paris, Bloud, 1910), pp. 74-75.
\textsuperscript{16} Various reports from the 1880’s and early 1890’s, Agissements royalistes, F712431.
Even the government came in time to realize how exaggerated were its anxieties. In a report of March 31, 1887, one of their agents, after an exceptionally detailed account of the militant royalists' activities, admitted in a surprisingly rare moment of candor of one of the Jeunesse Royaliste's weekly Wednesday luncheons at Durand's: "their conversations were banal—platonic talk of the return of the monarchy." Although such admissions did not bring an immediate end of surveillance (there were always too many agents who suggested that, despite the paucity of immediate evidence, the possibility of some future royalist coup), the government's interest in Jeunesse Royaliste activities began to taper off in the mid-'nineties. By July, 1896, an agent realistically reported that there were only about thirty royalist committees that functioned regularly, that the royalists had been hampered by a lack of funds since the Comte de Paris' death and that they were plagued by divisions, particularly by a generational conflict whereby the older royalists disliked and refused to cooperate with the Jeunesse Royaliste. In other words, despite their youthful enthusiasm and rudeness, they were not much of a threat to the Republic. "Their treasury is always empty," the agent concluded, "and in Paris the Jeunesse Royaliste is only an organization of snobs." 

The government also expended a great deal of effort spying on prominent royalist politicians. One who was a special object of attention was Duc Albert de Broglie, former conservative leader and prime minister in the opening years of the Third Republic, head of the conservative ministry during the 16th of May crisis of 1877. In view of Broglie's past prominence and his skill as a parliamentary strategist, as well as his reputation as a political Machiavellian and the bête noir of the republicans, the republican government's close scrutiny of the duke after 1877 is hardly surprising. What is surprising is that it continued to spy upon him long after he had ceased to influence royalist policy and suspected him of activities that were so clearly out of character.

The Duc de Broglie was scarcely the type of person to participate in or condone the noisy, militant, antiparliamentary tactics of groups like the Jeunesse Royaliste. He represented the older royalist tradition; he was an old-fashioned liberal, a constitutional monarchist, a resolved moderate and supporter of the "juste milieu", an instinctive opponent of extremism on all sides. Moreover, as the government ought to have realized, Broglie was unpopular with much of the Right, owing to his "fail-

17 Report of March 31, 1887, Agissements royalistes, F712431.
ure” as conservative leader in the 1870’s and he was increasingly out of step with his fellow monarchists. Even in the early 1880’s, when Catholics and monarchists loudly protested republican religious policy, Broglie, who defended Catholic interests in the Senate, remained a moderate. Despite his growing disenchantment with the Republic, especially after his defeat for the Senate in 1884, he eschewed the violent rhetoric of other royalists whose anti-republicanism subsequently led them to support General Boulanger. Broglie refused to have anything to do with the Boulangist movement; he even, or so many believed, encouraged the republican government to use its police powers against this new “man on horseback.” 20 As he somewhat humorously but firmly rebuked a friend, Léon Lavedan, editor of the conservative paper Le Correspondant:

I have just read your article (on Boulanger and why monarchists ought to support him): You are hard on the monarchy. Can it really play the role of Boulanger, I mean with War and parades, mounted on a black horse, just to win the applause of the common herd? Wouldn’t it be the same as asking a nice girl why she doesn’t earn, with her attractive qualities, as much money as her friend who knows how to show herself off with a furnished apartment and a horsedrawn carriage? 21

Yet the republican government acted as if it feared this middle-aged, moderate monarchist, who bore one of France’s most illustrious aristocratic names, who sat in the French Academy and who was esteemed as a historian and man of letters, whom Lord Acton once called the most distinguished lay Catholic thinker of his day. 22 As long as Broglie remained politically active and prominent as a conservative/Catholic spokesman, particularly up to his defeat for the Senate, the administration and police followed closely his movements. Carefully noted were his speeches in the Senate, his discourses before various conservative or Catholic societies, and his sporadic attendance at royalist meetings. In 1885 he was described as a member of the Comité de la rue du Marché Saint-Honoré, a group of old royalists who conducted propaganda for the Comte de Paris; a report of June 3, 1887, placed him at a meeting of royalists to discuss ways of using the recent ministerial

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20 Albert de Broglie, Histoire et politique (Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 1897), ix-xxii.
crisis to discredit the Republic; a report of March, 1884, noted that he was a member of the *Comité consultatif royaliste*, an advisory board of the pretender, served as president of the monarchist newspaper *Monsieur universel*, and acted as president of the *Comité royaliste d'action de l'Eure*; only grudgingly did the agent acknowledge that he was not on good terms with the pretender's close associates or that the Eure had never been a district in which monarchism was a political force and had no royalist organization so that these were empty honors. Perhaps the government's careful scrutiny reached its most absurd level in a report from a confidential agent who had followed the vacationing duke to Zurich:

> It appears that M. de Broglie, former minister, has had, at the Hotel Baur au Lac, a confidential interview with Marshal von Moltke. We have asked for, from Berne, an investigation of this interview.

To add even more melodrama to the possibility of Broglie's meeting with the famous Prussian general, the agent noted that Broglie had "tried to remain incognito but was recognized"; and he concluded with the tantalizing suggestion that, as the Comte de Paris also was rumored to be in Switzerland, it was "possible that the Duc de Broglie has had a private talk with the royalist pretender," although he conceded he knew nothing of the contents of their discussion or even if it had taken place.

Such reports, carefully but rather fantastically embroidered, are typical of much of the republican government's surveillance of royal activities. In retrospect, they seem deliberately alarmist, padded, misleading, most often tentative and hypothetical, if not fictional, in their delineation of royalist conspiracies. They indicate the republicans' fears, but also that their agents fed those fears and, in turn, were literally fed by them. After reading nearly twenty-five years of these reports, crammed full of fascinating but insignificant detail, they seem a monument to imaginary or at least unrealized anxieties; and yet the police agents always kept alive a possibility of the royalist menace, one report suggesting as late as 1896 that the Orleanists were "on the verge of staging a great coup." The republican government overreacted to its royalist critics and was, it seems, duped by its own agents or informers who

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23 Various reports, Agissements royalistes, F712431, 12433, 12438.
25 Ibid.
26 Undated report of 1896, Agissements royalistes, F712431.
dragged out this aspect of domestic spying longer than events justified. Fear is difficult to exorcise but in time the republicans put their concern with the old royalists behind them. A report of September 28, 1897, frankly stated of the royalist party and the seventy-six year old Duc de Broglie:

In the party temporization is personified by the old friends of the Comte de Paris. There are even certain conservatives, those who used to direct, who have withdrawn completely under the cover of their vows and who would not perhaps even follow an attempt or an evolution towards the monarchy. Of this group, the most significant is the Duc de Broglie, although he is president of the policy committee of the Moniteur universel, M. le duc d'Orléans' paper. The Duc de Broglie is bitter. An epoch already old, that of the famous *marche parallèle*, he pushed a little too far the union with the Bonapartists in the Eure. There were certain compromises with Raoul Duval and Janvier de la Motte for which he was tactlessly reproached; certain dossiers were brought to the Comte de Paris, who showed himself personally very annoyed.

From that time the Duc fell into disgrace, and he has nursed a secret grudge about it; he is the first of those who desire as an ideal of government a republic without republicans, even and especially to the exclusion of the monarchy.27

Thus, nearly twenty years after the monarchists had lost power and eleven years after the Duc de Broglie's retirement from politics, the republican administration ceased to fear and spy upon the old royalist leadership.

One has mixed feelings about the kind of governmental activity these reports reveal. For historians they are an unexpected windfall; however fanciful or petty the contents, the reports provide a mass of "evidence" historians would otherwise not have had. On the other hand, this material is padded, often ill-informed and obscurely and perhaps selfishly motivated. Above all, the reports raise questions about the republican government's, or any government's, respect for privacy and individual liberty and about the rationale of certain kinds of government investigations of its citizens. That a republican government, so little threatened in reality by the Right until the Dreyfus Affair at the end of the 1890's should expend so much effort covering the activities of an

27 Report of September 28, 1897, Agissements royalistes, F712431.
increasingly ineffectual, disorganized, unpopular and numerically insignificant royalist opposition seems incredible but enlightening. It tells us much about the paranoia of French republicans after 1879 and, perhaps, of governments generally. It may also suggest, at least in retrospect, how useless much of this information has proved, but that the “fear of others,” which de Tocqueville mentions in *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, is a perennial rather than just a historical problem.