

# France's Trial of "Left-Wing Terrorists" Is a Farce

BY

HARRISON STETLER / RONA LORIMER

France is holding its first full trial of "left-wing terrorists" in decades. Prosecutors say it'd be unfair if leftists didn't face the same charges as far-right or Islamist militants — but the terrorist conspiracy they allege is mere fantasy.

If you were looking for a history of far-left political violence in Europe, you would have done well to sit in at the Paris courthouse last Wednesday. In his closing remarks for the so-called December 8 case, state attorney Benjamin Chambre, of the National Anti-Terrorism Prosecutor's Bureau (PNAT), held forth for hours in a sermon on the history of "ultraleft terrorism."

Making sweeping gestures (and historical correlations), Chambre had no qualms about equating Molotov cocktails thrown at the French embassy in Athens in 2016 with Action Directe gunning down police officers on Avenue Trudaine in 1983. One would have thought that European politics had been rife with urban guerrilla struggle well beyond the end of the 1960s–80s period of political violence known as the Years of Lead.

The seven defendants in this case (arrested on December 8, 2020) committed no such acts of violence. But for the last three weeks they have been standing trial on terrorism-related charges. And while they committed minor infractions like the unlicensed possession of hunting rifles and low-level experiments, they are collectively accused of "*association de malfaiteurs terroristes*" (AMT), or terrorist conspiracy. Thanks to the shaky logic of France's anti-terrorist laws — of which the AMT is the cornerstone — all that has to be proven is their intent of preparing acts of violence against the state.

## Signal, the Harbinger of Violent Conspiracy

The case the prosecution has tried to hang on the seven defendants revolves around Florian D., who previously lived on the ZAD — one of several “*Zones à Défendre*,” a protest camp in this case opposed to the building of a dam — in Sivens, and taught French at the Calais Jungle migrants’ camp. It claims that he went to Rojava to learn the ropes of guerrilla combat so that he could then return to France, create a terrorist cell of people with different forms of violent expertise, and commit acts of terror on French soil. A fireworks expert, a hunter, a “computer scientist,” the founder of an Airsoft pellet gun society, naturally called a front for alleged paramilitary training . . . this is how the prosecution has profiled some of Florian’s circle.

From our seat in the courtroom audience of the last few weeks, however, these dangerous experts looked more like a benevolent collection of squatters and *punk à chiens*, with an interest in revolutionary movements, helping migrants, and living an itinerant lifestyle in vans or on land occupations. We have heard defendants accused — on the basis of house raids and planted microphones — of leading “clandestine” lives with the ephemera of conspiracy (the presence of USB sticks, the use of Signal), trying to start revolutions (the feminist zines in their library); and trying to make bombs (corroborated, in the state’s arguments, by sound recordings of alleged explosions and the presence of paraphernalia such as jam jars, wires, and household chemicals).

The case was quick to fall apart, and the prosecution’s closing arguments sounded more like a defense of the case’s legitimacy rather than an exposé of the culpability of the accused. On October 25, the two state prosecutors spoke for a total of over five hours, saying so much and so little. In reality, many of the defendants were born long after the historical facts implicitly leveled against them in Chambre’s fire-and-brimstone speech. Intellectually lazy but well delivered, it was composed mainly of the “context” section of the case file. The point of the remarks was thus: to demonstrate the previous existence of far-left terrorism, and to allege that this disparate group of seven individuals — some friends, others previously unknown to each other — represented its revival in the 2020s.

The trial of the December 8 group marks the first anti-terrorism case against left-wing activists since the 1990s. The Tarnac fiasco of 2008, which put ten “anarcho-autonomists” on trial for alleged sabotage, involved ten years of complicated legal proceedings, and terrorism charges were abandoned before the case was dropped in 2018. In the prosecution’s closing arguments, it was not hard to see the political importance that this case is carrying: it is a desperate attempt by the state to spark fear about the far left.

To paraphrase the prosecutor: plenty of French people accused of jihadist sympathies and of participating in Islamist terrorist cells have stood before anti-terror tribunals, like far-right agitators

(the so-called Barjols trial ended in February 2023, with three AMT convictions), so it's time for the far left to be tried under the same hammer. Chambre even lambasted what he called the "leniency" of the press in its coverage of the December 8 trial — correspondents from outlets such as the left-leaning and perfectly mainstream *Le Monde* and *L'Obs* and slightly further-left *Mediapart* have pointed out the weakness of the state's charges.

"Our society finds it easier to close its eyes to the activities of this movement," the state's attorney said of a supposed tolerance for the ultraleft, regretting what he called the public's "double standards" that he hoped the court would no longer tolerate.

But for all the tough rhetoric, one wonders if the closing arguments showed a retreat on the state's part — after three weeks of debate on the material "facts," or lack thereof. The prosecution's attention was almost entirely zeroed in on Florian D., for whom it requested a six-year mandatory prison sentence, calling for a series of lighter and partially suspended jail sentences and fines for the other defendants.

Warning of the threat of "one violent and radicalized man who built up a network around himself," the state prosecutor shot back against the group's defense and testimony as a collective effort to "save comrade [Florian] D."

## Only Ever Words

The state's obsession is "saving the [Florian] D. dossier," attorney Raphaël Kempf retorted on Friday, October 27, in his long closing argument in defense of his client. In the two final days of hearings last Thursday and Friday, the counsels of the seven defendants took to the stand to argue for the acquittal of the AMT charges.

What the state's case amounts to, they argued, is the stringing together of many isolated acts — some minor infractions in French law — into a horror story of terrorist conspiracy. The "material" proof to buttress this claim is scant, however: evidence of explosive experimentation; play with airsoft rifles; and transcripts of recorded talk about hating cops and the French state. (Florian D. is thought to have been bugged by the intelligence services well before anti-terrorism prosecutor PNAT took over the case in February 2020, and the defense has complained about the irregularity of those recordings).

Of the materials seized in several locations upon arrest in December 2020 — and of the kind used in two small explosives experiments in February and April of that year — attorney Alice Becker said, "it was all of a kind that a pyrotechnician would have at their home." It was her client, Simon G. — an

old friend of Florian D. and a fireworks professional — who had played around with explosives over a few days in the latter’s van in early 2020.

Weekends like the February 2020 hangout between Florian D. and Simon G., or an Airsoft afternoon like the kind that four of the defendants participated in during the boredom of the April 2020 COVID lockdowns, were presented as the would-be smoking gun proving that radical political chatter was not just idle talk. Another lawyer scoffed at the way the “nonsense” her client got up to during the pandemic was being referred to as terrorism. Of a digital copy of an Action Directe letter seized from Camille B., the latter’s attorney, Guillaume Arnoux said: “And all that proves there was an intention? That’s just not serious.”

“It’s all words, only ever words, just the same words,” one attorney said deadpan on Friday, in a tongue-in-cheek quote from “Paroles, paroles,” singer Dalida’s iconic song with Alain Delon. “Nothing but words.”

Indeed, what this trial boiled down to was a bunch of leftists trying to explain to a judge what’s normal in a counterculture scene, and fully acceptable in a free society: having opinions and talking about ideas that are perhaps unsavory for the established order.

The defense’s difficult job was to disprove their clients’ alleged participation in an imaginary group with an imaginary intention to commit something imaginary that never happened. The case could be reduced to what Kempf described as a fight over a “narrative,” with Becker criticizing the state’s dependency on conditional words like “would have.”

As many of the lawyers pointed out, their clients were being tried for conversations they had in private, signaling the dangerous precedent that could be set were private discussions to be considered as intentions in the eyes of the law. Camille B., for example, was being judged for coming out of a bank in 2020 in a fit of frustration and lyricism saying that she’d like to “burn down all of the banks.” This made it into the case file as a clear and present intent to attack banks.

“My client has critical ideas,” said Camille B.’s attorney, referring to the latter’s well-versed interest in revolutionary movements and history. “But she has the right.”

“I’d like to say,” Camille B. said from the bar in her emotional closing statement, “I’m not a terrorist, and I’ve never been a terrorist. Rather, I’m quite proud of all the movements and struggles I’ve been able to participate in.”

The courtroom applauded each of the defendants’ closing remarks, to the continued distaste of the presiding judge. The verdict is scheduled to be delivered on December 22.

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