

Dartnell, Michael Y. Action Directe. London: Cass, 1995.

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Dartnell, Michael Y. *Action Directe*. London: Cass, 1995.

The categorization of terrorist groups in France is not an easy task. One possible distinction is between those groups that seek regional autonomy, such as the FLNC in Corsica, and those that are motivated by a strong ideological commitment at either end of the political spectrum. But such an apparently neat dichotomy ignores the reality of regional movements who espouse socialist principles, and Marxist-Leninist groups that dabble in the rhetoric of national self-determination. French political culture is replete with anomalies that provide a perfect home for the cross-cutting influences that permeate the occasionally overlapping *groupuscules* responsible for much of France's politically-motivated violence. Any serious academic analysis of this violence comes up against the sheer complexity of the subject. Different groups with divergent goals attack similar targets; and sometimes several groups claim responsibility for the same atrocity.

The book under review here focuses on one group in particular Action Directe (AD), which was at its most active between 1980 and 1987. Dartnell contextualizes his case-study in two senses: he traces the roots of extreme left thinking in France and shows AD to be the conscious heirs of a tradition stretching back to the 1789 Revolution. Secondly, he links the shifts and divisions in AD ideology to the changing background of French political society in the early 1980s. At precisely the time when AD was attempting to foment revolutionary fervor from a vantage point on the extreme left, French society was moving into a period of consensus that witnessed traditional polarities of right and left being subverted by implicit and explicit forms of *cohabitation* that were expressed not only in the domestic arena but also in foreign policy.

This shifting of familiar political landmarks left AD ideologically stranded on the sandbanks of an outworn *idée fixe*. Part of its reaction was to split into two factions: one maintaining a domestic French orientation (ADn), the other venturing into a range of global issues linked vaguely to a rather jaded 'neocolonial' agenda (ADi). The author tracks the relationship between the two factions, comparing ADn's continued attacks on police, judicial and big business targets, with ADi's new emphasis on more extraneous concerns such as NATO, Franco-German relations, French policy in Chad, the European Space Agency, and nuclear weapons. The personnel in the two factions were quite distinct; although there were some overlapping memberships with other groups, especially in the case of ADi, which seems to have worked closely with the Belgian extreme-left CCC, and the RAF in Germany. Ultimately, the author concludes correctly that neither faction was able to garner much support among the French public for whom AD words and deeds represented an irritating but dangerous menace to French society.

Dartnell's book also provides indirect, but nevertheless convincing, evidence that most AD activists were far from being the bitter, twisted, subhuman specimens of popular imagination. Some of the richest insights into the personal backgrounds of AD activists appear in Dartnell's footnotes: here we learn that the middle class 'girl next door' Aubron had appeared nude in Paris Match; that Frerot had been a 'good soldier, athletic and disciplined;' and that the twin 'stars' of ADi, Rouillan and Menigon, were educated, reliable employees who had turned to terrorism through personal conviction not personal

unhappiness. One is inevitably reminded of German left-wing activists like Gudrun Ennslin, the well-educated daughter of a Protestant pastor who taught Bible classes, or Ulrike Meinhof, the daughter of a museum curator who at high school (according to a recent study of the Baader-Meinhof Group) was "extremely popular . . . noted for her intelligence and charm."

Although the term has perhaps been devalued by frequent usage, Dartnell's book on Action Directe must surely qualify as the 'definitive work' on the subject. It is difficult to imagine that anything more about AD could be said, or that anything more needs to be said. Dartnell's research has not only thrown light on a clandestine and fractured group about which very little was known previously, he has also raised important questions that provide springboards for further research; the rationale for such violence in today's Western Europe; the psychology of those involved; the uniqueness or otherwise of these small terror groups in modern society. These problems still preoccupy us: Dartnell's work has made an important contribution to their resolution.

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