Without a Glimmer of Remorse

Book review

Don LaCoss

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a review of

Without a Glimmer of Remorse by Pino Cacucci, translated by Paul Sharkey, illustrations by Flavio Costantini (2006, Christie Books/Read and Noir; 364 pp.)

Read and Noir is the anarchist crime fiction imprint of anarchist Stuart Christie's publishing collective; it's an intriguing idea that deserves to be supported and I look forward to future titles. Back in 2005, Read and Noir put out an English-language translation (also by Paul Sharkey) of Pedro de Paz's murder mystery/political thriller *The Man Who Killed Durruti*. This time around, it's Pino Cacucci's 1994 fictionalized biography of anarcho-bandit Jules Bonnot (1876–1912), the pre-First World War burglar, counterfeiter, car thief, cop-killer, and bank robber who was the most wanted man in France at the time of his death. (Interested readers may enjoy Bernard Thomas's *La Bande a Bonnot* [1967] and Richard Parry's *The Bonnot Gang* [1987], two of the best non-fiction histories of that affinity group.)

The Bonnot gang's crime wave through Belgium and France in 1911 was remarkable in its time for its use of repeating rifles and automobiles. Police had never dealt with automatic gunfire or getaway cars before and they were flummoxed; the press often seized on this angle to hysterically paint the gang as an unstoppable league of futuristic anarchist super-villains. Bonnot had learned to be a truck mechanic when he had been drafted into the Army, and it was also there that he learned how to use firearms; when he got out, he worked odd jobs doing car motor repair and chauffeuring the wealthy before he put his training with the State's weapons and his bosses' automobiles to use in his open rebellion against society.

He was finally cornered in a house in a Paris suburb in 1912 by more than 500 police, soldiers, firemen, and citizen-vigilantes. The Paris police chief ordered the house dynamited, and the cops dug Bonnot's unconscious body out of the rubble before shooting it a dozen times. Soon enough, the rest of the affinity group was gunned down or caught, and survivors were either sent to prison or guillotined. And, as usual, the authorities used the excuse of going after co-conspirators and sympathizers to crush any and all proletarian organizing activism in France and Belgium. But like the mythologized Pretty Boy Floyd of the US Dust Bowl twenty years later, Bonnot remained an idealized folk hero among the poor and working class despite his sensationalistic extra-judicial execution–during the wild days of May 1968, for instance, some strikers wheat-pasted Bonnot's picture on the outside walls of banks in Paris.

Still, because of his thrilling form of self-rebellion, Bonnot also has served as a lightning rod for debates over anarchist illegalism. Illegalism was the position taken by some who felt that criminal acts (arson, theft, and assault) against middle-class families and their ruling institutions were an effective means of insurrectionary agitation. At the turn of the Nineteenth Century in France, Belgium, Italy and Switzerland, anarchist periodicals regularly urged readers to partake in everyday acts of illegalist class warfare by forging checks, embezzling from work, picking pockets, dining and dashing from upscale restaurants, and vandalizing private property. However, following the death of Bonnot and the subsequent police repression, mainstream reformist socialist parties and labor syndicalists slammed illegalism as irresponsible and counter-revolutionary terrorism, saying that such crimes merely

imitated the mentality of greedy, self-serving capitalist individualism, and therefore they were wholly disconnected from the workers' struggle. For their part, many anarchists bitterly complained that illegalism was as violently coercive and immoral as the criminal acts committed by police and governments, also adding that the State's repressive reaction to them made life difficult for everyone involved in struggles against the government, illegalist or not.

Some stubborn Stirnerite egoists and other ultra-leftists have countered those charges by pointing to the primacy of autonomy and spontaneous mass action in illegalist activity. They argue that what the bourgeois justice system characterizes as crime and threats to the public order are sometimes actions of individual expropriation and reclamation, and that, under most circumstances, crimes committed for the sake of one's own desire are just as valid as any explicitly revolutionary actions that were more easily rationalized with ideology

Cacucci's novel is obviously an attempt to defend Bonnot's anarchist illegalism. Cacucci pointedly uses Bonnot's hard life as a brutalized and exploited metal worker, factory worker, miner, and soldier to explain his attraction to anarchy, and he does an effective job of realistically rendering the dead-end existences of the workers in early 1900s Europe in a way that makes illegalist anarchy seem the only possible solution. Cacucci explains this all in a flat, simple style of writing that, while explicitly political, is very accessible to readers.

Cacucci's book also makes an argument for the continued relevance of Bonnot's illegalism today, as the disputes among anarchists about direct action obviously continue in our so-called post-9/11 world–at the time I was reading *Without a Glimmer of Remorse*, some comrades here in Wisconsin and Minnesota were paying very close attention to the next round of grand jury subpoenas being issued as a result of the FBI's ongoing Operation Backfire crusade against environmentalists suspected of being ELF and ALF eco-saboteurs. In the near future, as the Green Scare police tactics ratchet up and the late-capitalist catastrophes worsen, I expect the century-old ideas and themes Cacucci writes about to become even more pressing and pertinent.

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