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DISPUTE OVER WALDECK ROCHET'S ILLNESS

by Kevin Devlin

Summary: The French Communist Party leadership has published a communiqué by physicians who attended former Secretary-General Waldeck Rochet during an illness that removed him from public life for his last 13 years (he remained nominal head of the party for several of those years, however). It has now been revealed that he suffered from Parkinson's disease, which severely affected his mental faculties. The communiqué is presented as a refutation of an unidentified press campaign, which is said to link Rochet's death with an alleged "conspiracy." This seems to be aimed at Maria Antonietta Macciocchi, a former Italian communist deputy who, in a book of memoirs, tells of a meeting with Rochet in October 1968: after he had strongly criticized the Soviets for the invasion of Czechoslovakia, another member of the PCF leadership, Etienne Fajon, tried to convince her that Rochet was going mad.

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Three months after the death of Waldeck Rochet, former Secretary-General of the French Communist Party (PCF), the party leadership has issued a detailed medical communiqué on the hitherto unidentified disease of the nervous system that completely removed him from public life in late 1969, although he remained nominal head of the party for several years after that. (1) At the same time, the PCF released a letter sent by Waldeck Rochet's three children to his successor, Georges Marchais, protesting against a campaign by certain unnamed publications that had questioned the quality of the medical treatment their father had received and had implied that his disease might have been "if not provoked, at least precipitated by problems within the international communist movement and the French CP." (2)

These two texts, moreover, were not issued in a normal manner: instead, they were read out to reporters summoned to the party headquarters by one member of the top leadership, Gaston Plissonnier of the Secretariat, accompanied by another, Pierre Juquin of the Politburo. Also striking was the contrast between the propagandistic overtones of Plissonnier's prefatory statement and the calmly factual communiqué signed by 10 physicians of various specialities:

At present a press campaign is seeking to "establish" that Waldeck Rochet, former Secretary-General of the French Communist Party, "supposedly" died of the consequences of a "mysterious" medical "conspiracy." The physicians who knew the truth about the illness of Waldeck Rochet and who find themselves indirectly under accusation, judge it necessary -- after having been released from the obligation of professional secrecy by the family of the deceased -- to provide the following clarification.

The statement finally confirmed what had long been rumored: that Waldeck Rochet had suffered from Parkinson's disease, and that as a result his mental faculties were severely affected during the last 13 years of his life, despite which he remained the nominal Secretary-General of the PCF for several of those years. L'Humanité took 12 years to inform party members that the first symptoms of an unidentified "organic neurological disease" had been detected by his doctors in October 1968, and it was not until his death that the PCF leadership admitted that "a very grave disease finally removed him from all activity in November 1969." (3)

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- (1) See Kevin Devlin, "The Second Death of Waldeck Rochet," RAD Background Report/40 (World Communist Movement), Radio Free Europe Research, 24 February 1983.
 - (2) Texts of the medical communiqué and of the Rochet children's letter in l'Humanité, 17 May 1983.
 - (3) PCF Politburo statement, l'Humanité, 16 February 1983.

The new medical communiqué said that in October 1968 two of the signatory physicians had confirmed the diagnosis of Parkinson's disease, manifested first in cerebral arteriosclerosis. This diagnosis implied "reservations about the possibility of aggravation of neuropsychiatric disturbances already manifest."

In June 1969, while he was taking part in an international conference of communist parties in Moscow, Waldeck Rochet was hospitalized there because of a hemorrhage of the urinary tract. X-rays having shown a suspect image on the right kidney, he was operated on for removal of a noncancerous cyst. On 25 November 1969 he was hospitalized again in Paris for urinary problems and had an adenoma (a tumor, usually benign) removed from the prostate. The operation was, however, followed by phases of deterioration, as a result of which "severe cerebral deficit" was observed. In May 1970 an examination by neurological specialists could only confirm this "deterioration of the cerebral functions." In the years that followed, Waldeck Rochet's condition became "irreversibly and peacefully worse, in spite of exceptionally attentive and competent care."

The letter sent to Georges Marchais by Rochet's children, two daughters and a son, said nothing of his illness but expressed strong indignation over the unidentified press campaign concerning it, describing this interference in their family life as "intolerable, indecent, and an affront to all those who helped us in this trial: his comrades, the most competent physicians, the nursing team."

Mad or Sad? Who was responsible for this "campaign," and just what was being alleged about Rochet's illness that required this outraged refutation? It seems that the main target, despite the term "press campaign," is not a newspaper or periodical but a book just published in Paris by a former Italian Communist who is now an independent deputy in the European Parliament. (4) The author of this book (5) of memoirs with the odd title, "Two Thousand Years of Happiness," is Maria Antonietta Macciocchi, a former national deputy of the PCI. In the late 1960s she was the Paris correspondent of l'Unità; and it is this experience that provides her controversial contribution to the question of Waldeck Rochet's illness.

There had already been one brief but venomous reaction by the PCF to this passage of her book, as covered in several reports and a television interview. A bleak statement in L'Humanité of May 3 referred to her as having distinguished herself by "hateful and systematic anticommunism in the European Assembly." It went on:

- (4) She was elected on the list of the small Radical Party, but later joined the socialist group, and is a socialist (PSI) candidate in the forthcoming Italian elections.
- (5) M. A. Macciocchi, Deux Mille Ans de Bonheur (Paris: Grasset, 1983). For reviews of the book, see the articles by Jacques Nobécourt and Patrick Jarreau in Le Monde, 15-16 May 1983, and by J.-P. E. in Le Nouvel Observateur, 6 May 1983.

The tissue of fables that she is peddling would not be worthy of attention were it not for the fact that she accuses the leadership of the French Communist Party of being responsible for the death of our Comrade Waldeck Rochet. Rarely has such a degree of ignominy been reached.

This counterattack is notable for what it fails to reveal. Just what, one might well ask, is the controversy about? A glance at the last stage of Waldeck Rochet's career will help answer this question.

As Secretary-General, Waldeck Rochet led the PCF along what would later be called a Eurocommunist path, marked by a rapprochement with the Italian CP, commitment to political pluralism and civil liberties in a socialist France, and a strategy of leftist

"The pure and simple truth is that the Czechoslovak people do not accept the presence of the Russians on their territory and are unanimous in condemning the military intervention. . . ."

When she reported this conversation to Longo, he seemed to be in entire agreement with these sentiments. Not so Fajon, however. He kept trying to interrupt the conversation, telling Rochet to take it easy, that he needed rest, that the Italian visitor had to leave, and finally having his secretary summon Rochet's chauffeur. When the Secretary-General had gone, Fajon told Macciocchi that she "must not take him seriously": the "poor old man" was rambling; and when she visited him again some time later, he said bluntly:

Waldeck is mad. He told us that during the night the Virgin [Mary] had appeared to him; she wanted to shield suffering Czechoslovakia with her blue cloak. He is completely out of his mind.

Conflict With Soviets. In her memoirs, as reported by l'Espresso, Miss Macciocchi strongly disagrees with this suggestion that Waldeck Rochet was already going mad in the fall of 1968: she found him very critical of the Soviet regime but by no means unbalanced, but his stand on Czechoslovakia had brought him into conflict with the Soviets, and it was in their interests that he cease being head of the PCF.

This view is shared by a more outspoken champion of the Prague Spring: Pierre Daix, former managing editor of Louis Aragon's review, Les Lettres Françaises, who left the PCF in 1974 in disgust at its acceptance of Czechoslovak "normalization." He told l'Espresso:

It was not in 1968, but in June of 1969, after being operated on in Moscow for a kidney infection that Rochet began to go mad. And in spite of that, in February 1970 he was re-elected Secretary-General of the PCF.

Philippe Robrieux, the well-informed ex-Communist who has produced a massive, four-volume "internal history" of the PCF, (8) was cautious in his comments on Macciocchi's apparently vague charges of a "conspiracy" to remove Waldeck Rochet. In an interview (9) he noted that there had been "conflict" between Rochet and the Soviets as early as 1965, when he supported the presidential candidature of Francois Mitterrand, to the obvious displeasure of the Kremlin, and added that during a long conversation in 1967 the Secretary-General had made clear his concern about "the renewed Soviet hard line" [regel] and the ascension of Georges Marchais." He went on:

(8) Phillippe Robrieux, Histoire Intérieure du Parti Communiste
(four volumes)

Six years later, Aragon confided to me:
"Waldeck should never have let himself be
operated on and cared for in the USSR. I
implored him not to do it. Soviet medicine
is the worst in the world." For him, who
was well-informed, Waldeck was not mad.

Robrieux, however, came to a cautious conclusion, or lack
of conclusion:

There is no doubt that the Russian lobby wanted
to get rid of Waldeck; but, with regard to his
illness, too many points remain obscure or contra-
dictory to allow one to take a stand for or
against the official version. What is certain
is that the fate of Waldeck constitutes one of