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Ravachol

Mitchell Abidor

2009

Born François Koenigstein in 1859, Ravachol was perhaps the purest avatar of the ‘bomb-throwing anarchist.’ In a period that didn’t lack for other violent anarchists, like Auguste Vaillant and Emile Henry, Ravachol managed to capture the imagination of those opposed to the corrupt order of the French Third Republic. The novelist Paul Adam was able to say of him: “In this time of cynicism and irony, a saint is born to us.”

A society with horrible divisions of high and low, marked by regular political scandals and large-scale dislocation, France was fertile ground for oppositional movements of all kinds. The short-lived mix of left and right that was *Boulangisme*, Drumont’s ferocious anti-Semitism (which actually managed to blame floods on the Jews), a growing socialist movement, and various schools of anarchism, all battled for public support.

Ravachol came to stand for the propagandists of the deed; anarchists not interested in organizing mass movements to overthrow the bourgeois order, but who felt that killing the representatives of that order, the worst enemies of the proletariat, would bring about a better world.

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Ravachol did not himself have to imagine the horrors of the life of the working-class. Born into a poor family he started working at age eight. A difficult early life, spent wandering France looking for work while being paid a pittance, taught him to hate capitalism. Reading Eugene Sue's *Le Juif Errant* at age 18, and attendance at a collectivist circle, made of him a convinced atheist and socialist. Continued reading led him to choose anarchism as his chosen path against the capitalist system.

After years of difficulty, he felt forced to a life of crime as a way of surviving. Few, indeed, are the revolutionary heroes who have grave-robbing as a past occupation, but Ravachol, was neither an ordinary criminal nor anarchist. By this time he had already worked as a counterfeiter and *contrebandier*. Besides grave robbing, in 1891 he robbed and killed a hermit, and was suspected of other murders as well, for which he was arrested.

Escaping from police custody, in 1892 he embarked on the series of political attacks for which he was to become famous. Avenging the condemnations of a pair of anarchists, he attacked the home of a judge and a government attorney, killing no one while causing considerable property damage.

Captured and put on trial, he was sentenced to hard labor for his political acts, but at a subsequent trial sentenced to death for the murders he had committed. It was at the criminal trial that he attempted to deliver an impassioned and unrepentant speech explaining the causes of his acts and of his revolt, but was cut off before he could do so. When his sentence was announced, his only response was: "*Vive l'anarchie!*"

He lived on in popular memory. A song was written in his honor, called *La Ravachole*, and it is said that the word *ravacholiser* was invented to describe the act of bomb throwing.