

The Black Sea Mutiny: the Marty Myth and the Role of the Anarchists



A look at the French Communist Party's mystification of the 1919 Black Sea Mutiny.

“We, the Social Defence Committee and the Black Sea Sailors Committee, have transformed this wind bag (André Marty) into a hero”. (End of report of talk by Louis Sellier to the municipal councillors of Paris 11 December 1931).

There are two histories of the mutiny of the French sailors on the Black Sea in 1919. There is the official Communist Party version, where Andre Marty is the leader of the revolt and there is another more authentic version (see [the account by Tico Rossifort](#)). The French Communist Party portrayed Andre Marty, a leading light in their party for many years, in hagiographic accounts of the Black Sea Mutiny, as its inspirer and leader.

While it is true that Marty was the only officer involved in the events, we shall see that in fact he was already under arrest during the main events of the mutiny.

As Rossifort notes there were several action committees on the French ships, made up of ordinary seamen or petty officers who were engineers.

Among these were Louis Philippe Badina, quarter master-mechanic, and originally from Marseille, on board the destroyer Protet; Jean Francois Braman, another quartermaster-mechanic. There was a group of twenty or thirty sailors on board the battleship France, who were either anarchists or sympathised with anarchism and had put together a secret library, circulating pamphlets and newspapers, of which La Vague had the most influence on those aboard. Jean Fichou and Virgile Vuillemin were important figures in this committee.

Vuillemin was sympathetic to anarcho-syndicalism, later, after the events, becoming involved with an individualist anarchist group Vers la Beaute. Jean Fichou (born 1893) from Brest, was a convinced anarchist. Others in the committee on the France were the sailors Antonin “Marius” Ricros, an anarchist sympathiser and Alphonse Sauveur Cannonne.

For his part, André Marty came from a family with radical traditions. His father Isidore was a participant in the Commune of Narbonne of 1871 and later as an exile was involved in anarchist circles in Buenos Aires. One of his brothers, Miche, was for several years secretary of an anarchist group in Perpignan. Andre Marty himself joined the French Navy in 1908 at the age of 21. In 1916 he was admitted to the school of officer-mechanics, graduating from it a year later.

He maintained his membership of a Masonic lodge during this time. He appears to have been a solitary and obsessive character, compiling files on his superior officers. Serving as chief mechanic on board the destroyer Protet, he was sent on that ship to the Black Sea as part of a French expeditionary force. Conspiring with Badina and others to seize the ship, he was arrested at the Romanian port of Galatz. Badina managed to escape, whilst Marty was imprisoned first on the cruiser Waldeck-Rousseau and then on the Protet, which carried him to Istanbul to imprison him at the French embassy. He was there when the mutinies broke out in the Black Sea Fleet. He was thus obviously not the leader of the mutiny, a role later attributed to him by the Communist Party.

Sentenced on 11th June in Paris on the twin charges of giving intelligence to the enemy and of conspiring to take the Protet by force and to pass it to the enemy, Marty was acquitted on the first charge and sentenced to 20 years hard labour on the second count. It was Badina, who remained at liberty until 1920, who alerted the *Committee of Social Defence* and the *Sailors Committee* that had been set up to defend the other sailors. Following this the two committees decided to link the two cases.

Marty's brothers Jean and Miche became involved in the solidarity campaign to free him. They did not get any response from *L'Humanité*, the paper of the Communist Party, and only obtained that of *Avant-garde*, the paper of the Communist youth organisation. One of the Communist leaders, Ludovic Frossard, then had the idea of using the Marty case for electoral gains. Through the history of the family and his connection with the mutiny Marty could be turned into a rallying symbol for the left. All that was needed was to transform him into the leader of the mutiny itself. He was elected as a municipal councillor whilst still in prison, and then as a councillor-general. After the campaign secured his release he was elected as a Communist MP. He only joined the Communist party in 23rd September 1923, two months after his release. The myth of Marty as leader of the Black Sea mutiny was perpetuated for decades. Thus one could read laudatory tributes to Marty in the Communist press such as the following: "*The French sailors, guided by André Marty, revolted*" and "*...Andre Marty, on two occasions, organised the Black Sea mutiny and the passing over of the crews to the side of the Russian workers*". Marty was thus utilised to recuperate the mutiny for the Party whilst the role of anarchists as main initiators was obscured. (It should be noted that on the other side of the world, Ton Duc Thang, leading Vietnamese Communist, used his mythical participation in the mutiny to bolster his own reputation and that of the Vietnamese Communist Party).



Marty became a faithful follower of Stalin, carrying out his policies in Spain when he directed the political supervision of the International Brigades during the Civil War. He became known as the Butcher of Albacete - probably this name was first applied to him by the French anarchist paper *Le Libertaire* - because of summary executions for the slightest infraction. He was then sent to Moscow where he worked for the Comintern until 1943. He was one of the Communist leaders who wanted to launch a revolution in France with the departure of the Nazis. This was quickly vetoed by Stalin and may have later contributed to his own downfall. Marty had never got on with Maurice Thorez, another member of the Party leadership, and whilst Thorez was in Moscow he consulted with Stalin. As a result Marty and Charles Tillon (who had played a more authentic part in the Black Sea Mutiny) were denounced as police spies in 1952. Following Marty's expulsion from the Party, The Butcher of Albacete figured as one of the candidates on the electoral list put forward in January 1956 by Georges Fontenis and the Federation Communiste Libertaire! Marty died later the same year. Why had it been so relatively easy to remove Marty from the Communist Party? Trapped in the fabrications around his real role in the mutiny, it was not too much of an effort for the Communist leadership to make this come about, and they indeed released letters from Marty which compromised his reputation.

As for Badina, he was arrested on 22nd September in France and then sentenced to 15 years imprisonment in a military prison on 9th March 1921 for conspiring against authority and desertion. Like Marty, he was elected twice as a Paris councillor for the Communist Party whilst in prison and was amnestied in August 1922. The Communist Party then ran him for as an electoral candidate on many occasions in southern France. However, unlike Marty, who had started on a long career within the Party, Badina fell out with the comrades. Excluded from the metal workers union and the Party for having "betrayed his comrades" he turned towards the anarchist movement. At a stormy meeting on 3rd September 1924 he accused Marty to his face of being an informer, of having negotiated with the captain during the mutiny, and of having wanted to sell the Protet to the Russians. He then apparently became involved in criminal activities at Marseilles before dying in a dispute with another criminal.

It should be noted that probably the majority of the sailors involved in the mutiny did not join the Communist Party or if they did, had a stormy relationship with it. Charles Tillon was an exception to this. We have already seen the case of Badina. As for Vuillemin, one of the real organisers of the mutiny, and the founder of the Amicale des Anciens de la Mer Noire (

Friendly Society for the Black Sea Veterans), he became involved in resistance work in Toulouse and Besancon during the Second World War. He helped many Jewish families, providing them with false papers in order to leave France. He only joined the Communist Party in 1945, resigning in protest in 1952 when the campaign against Marty started. The close friend and associate of Vuillemin, Jean Fichou, appears to have remained an anarchist, and was involved in the Maison du Peuple at Brest, which had been set up by anarchists.

Another mutineer on board the France, Alphonse Cannone (born 1899) was sentenced like many other mutineers to ten years imprisonment. He escaped once, recaptured, and was sentenced to a further five years for striking an officer. Freed in 1926, he was then put up in Paris by Marius Brignon, anarchist and secretary of the Sailors' Defence Committee. He joined the Fédération Anarchiste Parisienne (FAP) and was apparently a member of the Groupe Noir, based at Montevideo in Uruguay, which engaged in international work. He was also involved in the work of the Union Anarchiste Communiste. He returned to sea in 1927 but was quickly diagnosed with pulmonary tuberculosis. In 1928 at Rouen He was elected secretary of the autonomous union of sailors, and took an active part in the merger talks with another autonomous union which led to the creation of the Union Syndicale des Travailleurs de la Mer. In March 1929 he resigned from his post as Rouen secretary of the new union when it voted to merge with another union.

Cannone joined the anarchosyndicalist CGT-SR, and was active among sailors at Dunkirk, Le Havre, and Marseilles. With the outbreak of the Spanish Revolution he left for Barcelona where he joined the Durruti Column and was wounded several times. During his stay in Spain he joined both the CNT and the FAI. With the victory of Franco, he left for Paris where he died of TB on 15th February 1939.

His friend and fellow mutineer Marius Ricros (born 1898) received a sentence of six years. He was active, along with his partner, in the Fédération Anarchiste de Langue Française (FAF) in Montmartre in 1936, becoming treasurer of its Paris section the following year. He was active in the Sailors Defence Committee in March 1939 in providing support for the gravely ill Cannone. In 1944 he appears to have been a member of the Fédération Anarchiste in Toulouse, and appears to have remained an active anarchist until at least the 1950s, dying in 1968.

Jean Braman was another mutineer who never joined the Communist Party and was indeed hostile to it. He formed a social studies group in 1925 opposed to the Party and to the union central it dominated, the CGTU. He was active at the same time in the local committee against the war in Morocco. He clashed on many occasions with the Communist leaders of the CGTU. He edited the paper A Toute Vapeur (Full Steam Ahead) the Nice rail workers paper, which took a line at odds with the Communist Party. In July 1930 he was criticised within the union by the Communist Party for sympathising with the anarchist orator Sébastien Faure at a meeting that he chaired. In 1931 he was tried for anti-militarist propaganda.

He was active in helping many Italian and Spanish militants from expulsion. In the course of these activities he was ambushed and knocked unconscious by a fascist gang. He was active in a committee to support Sacco and Vanzetti. He accomplished several missions in support of the Spanish revolution and appears to have been a war correspondent there. During the Second World War it is alleged that his anti-militarist positions appear to have brought him close to collaboration with the Vichy regime. Nevertheless, he gave much support to those who fell foul of the regime and to Jewish families. As a result he was imprisoned by the Germans between May and August 1944. On his release he was immediately arrested by the

Free French forces. He was acquitted of all charges in 1945, which did not stop his old Communist adversaries to continue to level charges of collaboration against him.

Now his antipathy towards the Communist Party moved him in a reactionary direction and he joined the Gaullist movement, moving further to the right in 1952 when he joined the anti-communist organisation Paix et Liberté. He died in 1987.

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Sources: Rossifort, T.; *The Black Sea Revolt*.

<http://militants-anarchistes.info/> Dictionnaire international des militants anarchistes, entries on Badina, Braman, Albert Cané, Cannone, Ricros.

Lochu, René; *Libertaires, mes compagnons de Brest et d'ailleurs*. Information on Jean Fichou, Lochu's mother's cousin.