

French neo-Nazi attempts to assassinate Chirac

David Walsh
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A 25-year-old neo-Nazi fired a shot at French President Jacques Chirac during the Bastille Day parade in Paris on Sunday. Maxime Brunerie, an individual with extensive connections to the extreme right, took a .22-caliber rifle out of a guitar case and was able to get off one shot, although his arm was jostled, before being subdued by spectators in the crowd.

The would-be assassin was at least 100 to 150 meters from the open-top jeep in which Chirac was riding, making it unlikely that his weapon could have delivered a fatal shot. The gun, which Brunerie purchased on July 6, is generally used for hunting small animals. The French president was unaware of the incident until told about it later. The annual parade, marking the onset of the French Revolution in 1789, went ahead as scheduled.

After police handcuffed Brunerie, he was taken to the headquarters of the criminal investigation department and later transferred to a police psychiatric unit in Paris. He can be held for up to a month, while officials determine if he is mentally competent to stand trial.

The 25-year-old was described as confused and incoherent during his interrogation. Brunerie reportedly told investigators that he intended to assassinate Chirac and then turn the gun on himself. He apparently said that he wanted “to be talked about.” According to the *Guardian* newspaper, Brunerie told police that he had “a profound hatred of Jacques Chirac and of democracy.” French authorities report that they believe Brunerie acted alone.

The French government and media response to the shooting was relatively muted. Chirac reportedly replied, “Ah, bon? [Oh, really?],” when told of the incident, and was not even questioned about it later the same day by three journalists during the traditional July

14 televised interview. Interior Minister Nicolas Sarkozy described the episode as an assassination attempt and called Brunerie a “militant of the extreme right ... known for his violence and with a police record.” Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin, in London for talks with British Prime Minister Tony Blair, said he had been profoundly shocked by the attempt against Chirac’s life, but added that risk to personal security was one of the realities that comes with high office.

Police officials indicated that Brunerie had been known to them for his extreme-right associations since he was 18. He has participated in numerous neo-fascist parties and groups, including the French and European Nationalist Party (PNFE), the far-right student movement, Union Defense Group (GUD)—known for its attacks on left-wing groups—and most recently, Radical Unity (UR). The latter was founded in 1998 in an attempt to unify a number of the extreme right youth and student groups in France. He was also an avid fan of the Paris Saint-Germain football club, and associated with a group of skinheads and ultra-right supporters of the team.

All of the organizations with which Brunerie associated are violently anti-immigrant and anti-Semitic, open defenders of Hitler and the Nazis. The PNFE holds annual banquets to honor Hitler’s birthday. UR is characterized by a “permanent anti-Semitism,” according to *Le Monde*, denounces “cosmopolitan finance” and promotes a virulent anti-Americanism. It welcomed the September 11 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington.

Brunerie apparently had a particular fascination with American white supremacist groups and a British neo-Nazi group known as Combat 18 (1 and 8 are the first and eighth letters of the alphabet: A and H, for Adolph

Hitler). He previewed his act indirectly on the latter's web site on July 13. Signed "Maxime," the message read, "Watch the TV This Sunday, I will be the star ... Death to zog, 88!" In the lexicon of neo-Nazis, "ZOG" stands for "Zionist occupied government" and "88" for "HH," or Heil Hitler.

Brunerie's associations, however, were not simply with semi-underground neo-Nazi groups. In March 2001 he ran in France's municipal elections as a candidate in Paris' 18th arrondissement for the National Republican Movement (MNR) of Bruno Mégret, the 1998 split-off from Jean-Marie Le Pen's National Front (FN). Earlier this year, on the evening of the first round of the presidential election, a reporter from *Le Monde* interviewed Brunerie at the MNR's Paris headquarters. He told the newspaper that he would vote for Le Pen in the second round despite "the drift of the FN."

Gilles Ivaldi of the Institute of Political Studies in Grenoble told the *Nouvel Observateur* that the neo-Nazi "groupuscules" [small groups] and the FN and MNR "coexist and know each other. ... There is a real porosity between the FN and MNR youth and the more violent fringe movements."

Mégret, to whom the episode was highly embarrassing, denounced the assassination attempt, but "deplored the fact that some are attempting to give it a [political] significance, insofar as the author appears to be a psychiatric case."

Le Pen denied that the shooting had any political significance: "Political figures are more usually attacked by madmen and unbalanced people than by political adversaries." He told another reporter, "I think that if there is a madman, they always end up, one way or another, saying that he is from the extreme right."

According to the French press, Brunerie was a business student (Brevet de Technicien Supérieur) in management and accounting, and occasionally worked as a driver. He was born in Evry (Essonne), a new town 30 kilometers south of Paris (population 82,000), in 1977, an area where a number of high-tech companies are concentrated.

At the time of the shooting Brunerie lived in nearby Courcouronnes with his parents and younger sister. His father works for Snecma, a leading manufacturer of aircraft engines, and his mother at the Carrefour supermarket chain. The family was away on vacation in

Spain when the incident occurred. Police raided Brunerie's home and seized a computer and a collection of pro-fascist literature, including a copy of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*.

This is the first reported attempt to assassinate a French head of state since the early 1960s, when the far-right OAS tried to kill President Charles de Gaulle for his perceived acceptance of Algerian independence. Two serving French presidents have been killed, Sadi Carnot in 1894 (by an Italian anarchist) and Paul Doumer in 1932 (by an insane Russian émigré).

Ivaldi of the Institute of Political Studies noted that the attack could express the disenchantment and frustration of a certain extreme-right element. The success of Le Pen in the first round of the presidential election "aroused among his supporters and in the groupuscules a very great hope. The most radical wings of the two parties and the groupuscules are disappointed. The great revolution they envisaged is not coming. This disappointment could encourage them to switch over to violent action."

A police specialist in far-right politics told the Agence France-Presse that Radical Unity, the group to which Brunerie recently adhered, was in disarray following the presidential and parliamentary elections. He stated that its members were "agitated and clearly ready to become more radical."

The Bastille Day incident underscores the extraordinary level of political and social tension in France. The ability of Chirac's right-wing camp, with the help of the official left, to leverage a 19 percent showing in the first round of the presidential election into a resounding majority in the June legislative elections supposedly "normalized" French political life. It did nothing of the kind. The mass disaffection with all the official blocs, left and right, can only deepen in the face of such a cynical and undemocratic process.



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