

France

Samuel Paty - How beheaded teacher's school dealt with Islamist hate campaign

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The trial of eight people accused of various roles in the October 2020 stabbing murder and beheading of school teacher Samuel Paty began this week in Paris. The killer, an 18-year-old Chechen, was shot dead by police at the scene of the attack, in the Paris suburb of Conflans-Sainte-Honorine. Paty was murdered after showing cartoons of the prophet Muhammed, published by Charlie Hebdo magazine, to a class he held on the subject of free speech. Mathilde Goanec reports here on the handling by the education authorities and Paty's school colleagues of the 10-day period before he was attacked when the teacher was the target of mounting threats from Islamist militants and their sympathisers.

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At the start of a trial expected to last two months, seven men and a woman appeared in court in Paris this week accused of various roles in encouraging the October 16th 2020 murder of school teacher Samuel Paty, perpetrated by an 18-year-old Islamist, Abdoullakh Anzorov, who stabbed and beheaded Paty as he walked home from his school in the Paris suburb of Conflans-Sainte-Honorine.

Paty had walked just a few hundred metres from the school when Anzorov, a refugee from Chechnya, attacked him from behind shortly before 5pm. Around ten minutes later, Anzorov was shot dead by police at the gruesome scene of his attack, after he pointed a gun at them.

People gathered outside the Bois-d'Aulne school in Conflans-Sainte-Honorine on October 17th 2020, the day after Samuel Paty's murder. © Photo Samuel Boivin / NurPhoto via AFP

Paty was targeted after a ten-day hate campaign against him on social media for having shown cartoon pictures of the prophet Muhammed, published by the magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, during a lesson on free speech.

The accused

Those on trial include two acquaintances of Anzorov's who, like him, lived in the town of Rouen, in northern France. One is Azim Epsirkhanov, 23, a Russian national who arrived in France in 2010, and the other Naïm Boudaoud, 22. They accompanied Anzorov to a knife shop in Rouen on the eve of Paty's murder, and to a gun shop on the day of the murder.

Another defendant is Brahim Chnina, the father of a pupil at the school who lied to him that she was disciplined for objecting to Paty sending Muslim pupils out of the class, in which a cartoon of the prophet naked was shown. Aged 13 at the time, she had lied – she was not even present at the lesson – and last year she received a 14-month suspended jail sentence for making false accusations. Her father joined with a veteran Islamist militant, Abdelhakim Sefrioui, also standing trial, in posting hate messages and videos on social media against Paty. Chnina is also accused of (and has admitted to) having spoken nine times on the phone to Paty’s killer, Abdoullakh Anzorov, during the days preceding the murder.

Priscilla Mangel, who has long associated with radical Islamic circles, is accused of encouraging Anzorov to murder Paty, in different communications with the Chechen shortly before his crime. Finally, three men all aged 22, Turkish national Yusuf Cinar, Russian national of Chechen origin, Ismaïl Gamaev, and Louqmane Ingar, from the French Indian ocean island La Réunion, are also accused of encouraging Paty’s murder. They and Anzorov formed a Snapchat group which published jihadist propaganda, and also Anzorov’s claim to have murdered Paty immediately after his beheading, along with pictures of the scene of the murder.

The chain of events at the school

In a backdrop to the central issues of the trial, which began on Monday, the investigation into the murder has established the chain of reactions among the education services and the staff of the Bois-d’Aulne secondary school where Paty taught, to the mounting threats made against him.

Paty, 47, a history and geography teacher, had given a lesson on October 6th 2020 on the issue of free speech, during which he had also shown cartoons of the prophet Muhammed published by *Charlie Hebdo* magazine. The publication of the cartoons depicting Muhammed led to an attack by two Islamist gunmen on the magazine’s Paris offices in January 2015 which left 12 people dead.

Paty had warned his teenage pupils that if any thought they might be offended by the cartoons they could look away or temporarily leave the class and return after the slides of the cartoons had been shown. He had given the lesson on several previous occasions.

But Brahim Chnina’s daughter, aged 13 at the time, told her father that Paty had asked her Muslim classmates to identify themselves and to leave the classroom before showing a cartoon of the prophet naked, and that she had been disciplined for objecting. She had lied – not only about Paty telling Muslim pupils to leave the class but also that she had been disciplined over her objections – she had not even been present at the lesson. But the lie soon spread when her father took to social media to denounce Paty in messages and video, causing a storm of protest and hate over the following days leading up to the teacher’s murder.

The defendants in the first trial over Paty’s murder, held in December 2023, were six former pupils of the school, including Chnina’s daughter. The five others were accused of helping Abdoullakh Anzorov who paid them to look out for Paty and, finally, for pointing him out to the killer. All six were found guilty at the trial, held behind closed doors, and were handed sentences ranging from suspended jail terms to six months in prison to be served at home wearing an electronic tag.

At the time of his killing, Paty had taught for the previous three years at the Bois-d’Aulne school, which had a good reputation and whose pupils came from mixed social backgrounds. The son of a head teacher, he was a history buff regarded as discreet, and courteous. Those who knew him well described him as being passionate believer in “free will”, and as a “calm” supporter of secularity. He had given his lesson on free speech and related issues over several years. During the investigation

into his murder, the title and contents of his last lesson was found on the school intranet. It referred to the phrase "I am Charlie" which was adopted in homage to the victims of the attack on the *Charlie Hebdo* offices, and read : "A situation of dilemma : to be, or not to be Charlie". The lesson looked into issues of respect, freedom of speech and religion, and included around 15 slides of *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons of Muhammed, including one showing the prophet naked.

Paty gave the lesson to two different classes on October 5th and 6th 2020. He suggested to those pupils who might be shocked by the images that they could leave the class or avert their gaze while they were shown and return to the discussion afterwards. Brahim Chnina, reacting after the false account given by his daughter, set off the spiral of hate by raging against Paty on social media, calling him a "loutish teacher".

During the day on October 6th, the school had already received phone calls from several mothers of pupils complaining about the lesson. The head teacher asked Paty to explain the situation to her. He subsequently called back one of the mothers to apologise for his "clumsiness". The mother told investigators that their conversation ended in a cordial manner.

But there was no cordial note struck in Chnina's reaction. He and a radical Islamist activist, Abdelhakim Sefrioui, the founder of a now-disbanded pro-Hamas group called the "Sheik Yassin collective", met on October 8th with the school's head teacher and its education advisor, responsible for ensuring a positive environment in the establishment. But it was clear that nothing could calm the two men, who demanded that Paty be sacked.

At the end of the meeting the head teacher immediately informed her hierarchy of the mounting problem. She firstly contacted the local education authority's technical advisor on school establishments and their environment to notify the risk, as she now saw it, of an intrusion into, or demonstration outside, the school. She never received a reply. She then contacted the deputy director of the national education services, who asked her to write up a report. The third person she contacted was the mayor of Conflans-Sainte-Honorine and the police liaison officer for the school. The latter informed her of the "activist" profile of Abdelhakim Sefrioui and assured her that a police presence would be set up in the school environs.

Meanwhile, the deputy director of the national education services put in a phone call to Brahim Chnina with the aim, he said, of "tempering the anger of the father and to bring calm to the situation".

Abdelhakim Sefrioui pictured during his arrest in Paris on December 29th 2012 for his involvement in a banned demonstration. © Photo Miguel Medina / AFP

By October 9th, "all" the means of passing on of information and warnings had been "mobilised", reported the education authorities' general inspectorate. But also by then, a debate about the pedagogical validity of Paty's lessons had begun and a hate campaign against the teacher and his school had been launched on social media. A few days later, the head teacher of the school again alerted her hierarchy, describing the situation as one of "extreme gravity". She referred to Paty's lesson as a project that had "no intention of bringing harm" but which had "shocked Muslim pupils", and she underlined the presence alongside the parent of a pupil of an individual known as a militant Islamist seeking to exploit the situation.

Mixed reactions among staff

Some teachers expressed concern over Paty's lesson. "His lesson broke the relationship of

confidence that we try to maintain with families who place their children in the state school [system],” said one teacher who was questioned by police after his murder. She and another teacher sent several messages on a professional messaging service to express her disagreement with Paty. But the investigation established that Paty also received numerous messages of support from his colleagues.

Brahim Chnina and Abdelhakim Sefrioui posted videos on social media which turned up the volume of hate messages targeting Paty and the Bois-d’Aulne school in recordings left on its voice mail machine. Some teachers, at a meeting held on October 12th, raised the question of using their right, granted in extreme situations, to withdraw their presence at the school.

In an email exchange with colleagues, Paty went into detail about the events. He said his lesson was a “human error”, accused two of his colleagues of not lending him their support, and concluded : “It must be understood that I’m threatened by local Islamists”, adding that the “whole” school was also.

Following the 12th October meeting, Paty’s colleagues took turns in accompanying him on his journey home from school, when he kept his face covered and tried to disguise his bodily appearance. The school receptionist paid attention to who came and left the building around the times of Paty’s comings and goings. According to a colleague with whom he was close, speaking after his murder, Paty “was also very angry at Mr Chnina, he felt overwhelmed by the social media, he was clearly losing hold of things”.

On October 13th, the head teacher and Paty together filed a formal complaint against Chnina for defamation. A few days earlier, Chnina had filed a complaint against Paty for distributing pornographic images, a reference to the cartoons. But the hate campaigns on social media appeared to be lessening, and the protesting phone calls to the school had become rare.

On October 16th, Paty, whose colleagues described him as being in a good mood that day, refused their offer to accompany him home.

“When I heard that a homicide had just been committed and that a person had just had their head cut off close to the school, I immediately thought of Mr Paty,” said the head teacher in a statement given to the investigation.

Last month, the school where Paty taught, the Collège du Bois-d’Aulne, was renamed Collège Samuel Paty.

Mathilde Goanec

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P.-S.

English version, with some added reporting, by Graham Tearse

This article in English is an abridged version of an original article in French, which can be found [here](#).

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